

BUCKTHIRSTY

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GENRE: Suspense/Crime. LENGTH: 2,128 words. SYNOPSIS: Some people will do *anything* for a buck. You might call them *buck-thirsty*.

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Travis and Tara were thirtysomethings who lived in an affluent suburb. Travis spent most of his time on the road. But when he did come home to his live-in girlfriend, he brought major cash.

Tara loved cash. She even loved Travis—as much as a woman like her was capable of loving a man.

Sometimes she wondered exactly what kind of work her boyfriend did to make all that money. But she didn't have time to think about it too much, since she was so busy shopping and hanging out with friends.

Tara ran to greet him at the front door. “Have a good week?”

“Yep. I’ve got another satisfied client.”

“Great, Honey. Where are we going for dinner? I’m craving a big, juicy steak.”

“Oh, Sweetie—I’m kinda tired. Couldn’t we just stay in and order a pizza?”

Tara pretended to be hurt. “Well, I guess so.”

“I need to make a few business calls.”

“Okay. No problem.”

“Thanks, Baby.” He kissed her on the forehead and then walked toward his study.

“Pepperoni or Meat Lover’s?” She reached into to her pocket for her cell phone.

“Pepperoni’s fine.”

After Tara had ordered the pizza, she went to the study. The door was closed, as usual. Months earlier Travis had sound-proofed the room—ostensibly to shut out the noise from the living room TV.

She hated it. What was he doing in there? What was he hiding? She often wondered if he might be having an affair. It would be easy. In fact, he *could* have a girlfriend in every city he did business in. How

would she know?

Not that she cared so much about fidelity. That was not the issue. Her concern was that he might dump her for another woman. That would mean no more country club, no more shopping sprees, no more... *anything*. She would be broke—out on the streets.

In the ten years since college, she had never made use of her business degree. And she wouldn't be able to get the kind of job she needed to support her lavish lifestyle. Her skills were more valuable in the bedroom than in the boardroom.

Tara hurried to the bedroom, reached into her dresser to the back of her panties drawer. She grabbed the device she had recently purchased from a website. It was an electronic stethoscope for listening through walls and doors.

She hid it behind her back as she walked quietly to his study. The door was still closed. Her heart began to race as she put on the headphones and placed the diaphragm against the door. She turned up the volume until she could hear him talking.

“...watched her strip. She walked around the room for a while, naked. She had a very sexy body, Man. And even though she didn’t know I was watching—it was like she was teasing me. Finally, she got into to bed and turned off the light. I let her doze off for a few minutes. Then I nailed her.”

Tara gasped. Then she quickly covered her mouth. Had he heard her? She tiptoed to the bedroom and put the device back in its hiding place and closed the drawer. When she turned around, Travis was standing in the doorway. She jumped.

“You okay?” He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“Well, I’m starving for that pizza. Hope you ordered an extra large.”

“Of course.”

He took off his suit coat and laid it on the bed. Then he walked over to Tara and took her in his arms. “And later I’m going to be starving for something else.” He slid his hands down to her butt and pulled her against himself.

“Yeah, Baby. Can’t wait.” She smiled, but wondered if her smile looked forced.

* * * * *

On Monday morning, as soon as Travis had left for the airport, Tara put on a provocative outfit and drove into town to visit John, Travis’ attorney.

John gave Tara the once over as she walked into his office. The outfit is working, she thought. She wasn’t ‘smoking hot’ anymore, but she was still sexier than just about anything else walking down the street.

“So, what can I do for you, Tara?”

Judging by the way he was eying her chest, she knew exactly what he *wanted* to do for her. And if she were available, she just might *let* him do it.

“Before I get to that...just out of curiosity...has Travis made any changes to his will lately?”

“No. Why?”

She smiled. “Oh, you know me. I always worry about things.”

“You’ve got nothing to be concerned about, Tara. Travis loves you very much.”

“I know.” She paused. “The reason I’m here today is that I have this friend...”

“Yes?”

“Actually, she’s a friend of a friend. And she’s got an abusive husband. She’s called the police several times. But he’s got buddies on the force, and they won’t do anything. So, she just wants to get out.”

“I see. But you realize I’m not a divorce attorney?”

“Yes, I know. She can’t divorce him anyway. He says that if she tries to leave him, he’ll hunt her down like a dog and rip her heart out.”

“Sounds like a rough customer.”

“Yeah. And I just thought you might know of somebody who could...”

“What?”

"Somebody who could *take care* of the guy."

John frowned. "Hold it. You really think I would be involved with people like that?" He stood up and walked to the side of his desk, ready to escort her out. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Tara stood and stepped in close to him. She placed her hand on his arm and looked up into his eyes. "Please, John. I apologize for even asking for your help—but I don't know where else to turn. And this woman is desperate. That creep of a husband could kill her this very day."

John shook his head.

"Surely you can give me some idea where to go for help."

"Well...I do know this lawyer. I take that back. I don't really *know* him—I know of him. He handed me his card at a conference. I don't know how he even got into the place. He practices out of his car, I think. Let me see," he said, walking around to his desk, checking his computer. After a few mouse clicks, he said, "Here it is." He read the name and phone number aloud as Tara wrote it down on a scrap of paper from her purse. "I don't know whether he'll have any useful advice for you, but you can give him a try."

"Thanks, John."

He led her to the door. "And don't tell anybody I gave you his name. I don't want to be associated with that scumbag in any way."

* * * * *

Tara drove around for twenty minutes before spotting a pay phone.

"Hello. Is this Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Attorney at law—at your service."

"Somebody gave me your number. I don't remember who." She went on to explain about the problem her friend of a friend was having.

He put her off at first, but after some pleading he finally relented, and gave her a phone number.

"What's his name?"

The line went dead.

She called the number.

"I'm sorry—I don't know your name, but a man gave me your number and—"

"—what's the job?" the man said coldly.

It was a very deep voice—almost too low to be real, thought Tara. Perhaps he was altering his voice electronically. She didn't care—as long as he could give her what she needed. "It's my husband." She gave him their address and told him when to do it: Friday night.

* * * * *

When Travis got home on Friday night, Tara had a lovely, romantic dinner waiting for him. Later she made passionate love to him. When they were done, she got up and went to the kitchen for her after-sex ice cream. Sure—it was mega calories. But still, it was much healthier than her old after-sex *cigarette* habit.

Travis was beginning to doze off when she walked back into the bedroom. "We're out of ice cream."

He didn't budge.

"Honey?" She shook him gently. "Honey, wake up. We're out of ice cream."

"I'm tired. Please just let me sleep." He rolled away from her.

She shook him harder. "Please, Baby. You know I've got to have my ice cream."

Travis began to snore.

"Honey! If I have to go out, I'm gonna buy a carton of *cigarettes*."

"Oh, alright." He forced himself to get up and get dressed.

As he was walking out the front door, she said, "Thank you so much, Baby. You're so sweet."

It's done, she thought. Travis would never be back with the ice cream.

Tara went into the bedroom and sprawled out across the bed. She was going to be rich. She'd finally have her own money. She fantasized about all the things she was going to buy.

* * * * *

Tara was expecting a call from the police at any minute. But instead, she heard somebody coming in the

front door. She checked the clock on the nightstand. It had been thirty minutes since Travis left. No sooner than she got up from the bed, he walked in.

"Surprised to see me?"

"Uh, no. But what took you so long?"

"Didn't you expect me to take a lot *longer*? As in *forever*?"

"What do you mean, Honey? I was worried about you."

"Really? Then why didn't you try calling my cell phone?"

"I don't know..."

"I know why."

Tara had a sinking feeling.

"It's because you thought I was dead!"

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You didn't think John would tell me?"

It was no use denying it anymore. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I must be sick or something. Maybe I need to see a psychiatrist. Yeah, that must be it. I need help."

"After all I've done for you."

"Well, don't act like you're Mr. Perfect. I overheard you talking about a woman you were with."

"What?"

"Last Friday night—you were in your study. I heard you say she was walking around naked and then after she went to sleep you nailed her!"

"So, you thought I had sex with her."

"And you're going to stand there and tell me you *didn't*?"

"That's *exactly* what I'm telling you." He reached around to his back to get something.

"So, you're just going to explain away the fact that you *nailed* her?"

"I nailed her with this." It was a large pistol. He reached into his left pants pocket to retrieve the suppressor, and attached it to the end of the barrel.

"What are you doing?" Tara held her hands up, as though they could deflect the bullets.

"I'm doing what do I do for a living?"

"You told me you were in sales."

"You didn't care what I was doing—as long as I brought home the money." He aimed.

"Wait! Who was that lawyer I called—that Mr. Johnson. Was that you?"

Travis grinned slyly. "Yep. Pretty convincing accent, huh? The hit man was me too. Oh, and by the way—John is the one who sets up jobs for me."

"No wonder he called you."

"Yeah. His legal practice is just a front. He's my pimp. And I'm one of his girls."

"You're good, Honey." She smiled sweetly. "Of course, I've always known that about you. You excel at everything you do."

"Thanks." He lowered the gun slightly. Could he really kill this woman that he loved? He had been deeply hurt when he found out she wanted him dead. But now he knew it was because she was jealous. She didn't want to lose him. Sure—she didn't want to lose his *money* either. But now that he realized there was no other man involved...

"Please, Honey."

He put the gun back under his belt. "I'll give you a few days to get moved out. Take anything you want."

"Thanks," she said, relieved.

When he reached the front door, he heard gunfire behind him. A bullet hit him in the leg. He spun around, whipping his pistol out as two shots caught him in the chest.

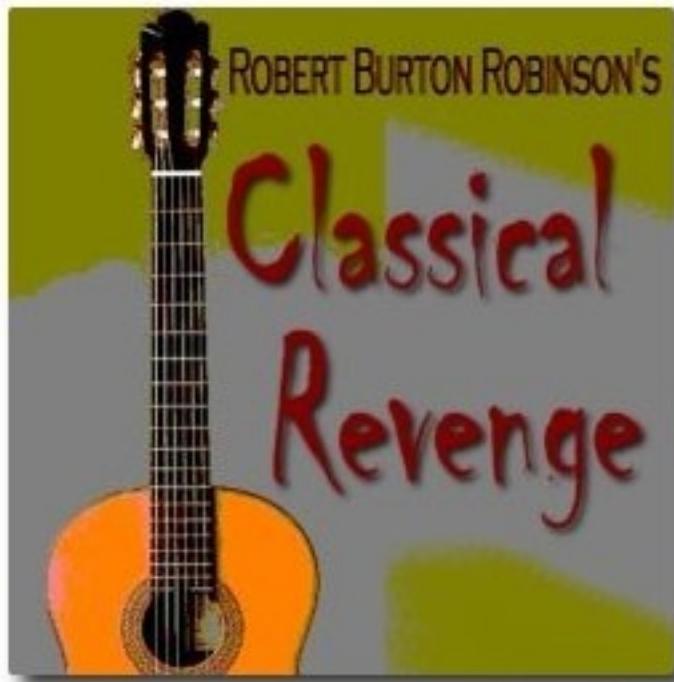
He returned fire with a single bullet, surgically placed right between her eyes. She was brain-dead before she hit the floor. Who did she think she was messing with? *He* was a professional.

But her *lucky* shots would prove just as deadly as his professional one.

Travis lay on the stone floor of the foyer oozing blood, unable to move, trying desperately to stay alive...as his mind faded to black.

THE END

CLASSICAL REVENGE



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GENRE: Humor/Horror. LENGTH: 2,398 words. SYNOPSIS: A woman ventures out at night during a snow storm into a dangerous part of town to get the last item on her Christmas list.

* * * *

Amy took the ring of keys out of the drawer and walked toward the front door.

The door burst open, and a woman rushed in and pushed the door against the blowing snow until it closed. "If the stupid idiots can't learn to drive in the snow they need to move out of Cleveland—find themselves a nice warm spot in Miami!" She pulled her hood back, took off the parka, and hung it on the coat rack near the door. Then she saw the ring of keys in Amy's hand.

"Were you about to close?" She checked her watch. "It's only six o'clock."

"Yes. We close at six."

"Two days before Christmas?"

"It doesn't matter. Our hours never change."

"Oh, I understand. It's because of your location, right? Customers are afraid to come to this part of town after dark."

Amy locked the deadbolt, ignoring the woman's comment. "Welcome to Amy's Classical Guitars. I'm Amy Kilmore."

"Good to meet you. I'm Luci."

"So, are you looking for a guitar for yourself? Or is this to be a Christmas gift?"

"For me. Wow, I've never seen this many classical guitars in one place."

"It's my specialty."

"So, I guess you don't get many rockers in here—even though the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is just a few blocks away."

"Actually, I do get some occasionally. Mostly those who have seen the error of their ways and are converting to classicalism."

"Classicalism?"

Amy smiled. "That's what I like to call it. When a guy's been playing steel strings all his life, and then gets his hands on a great classical guitar—well sometimes he'll convert—as he should. Because the dynamics, the overtones, and the warmth of the classical guitar are far superior."

"Steel strings are all I've ever played, since I was 14 years old. But I'm considering a classical guitar. So, convert me."

"Okay. Come on over here and take a seat."

Luci walked over to the chair and sat down.

"Now put your left foot up on this little stool." Amy turned and reached for one of the guitars hanging from the wall. She handled it lovingly—as though it was a newborn baby. "Try this one."

Luci reached into her pocket and pulled out a pick.

Amy frowned. "Oh, no—you don't use a pick. You pluck and strum with your fingers."

"I feel naked without a pick—but I'll try it." Luci formed a G Major chord with her left hand, and strummed with her right thumb. "Nice. Very nice."

"Yeah. See what I mean about the tone?"

"Yes. It's beautiful. What kind of strings are these? Catgut?"

Amy smiled. "No, they're man-made. In fact, those are my own special brand. I give each batch its own unique name. Those are Macho Delights."

"Interesting name."

"Thanks."

Luci hesitated. "They never really made strings from cats, did they?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"Catgut is short for cattle guts. Usually sheep intestines."

"Yuck."

"Most classical guitar strings are nylon these days. Or a composite material made from synthetic fibers. But you can still buy catgut strings. You can order a set on the web for \$80."

Luci's face contorted. "How do they make guitar strings out of intestines?"

"It's quite a process. They have to remove them from the animal's body while they're still warm.

Then they clean and strip them, twist and polish—"

"—gross. I've heard enough. So, what's so special about your strings?"

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you," said Amy, stone-faced. Then she laughed. "Just kidding. But it's a secret process. Amy Strings are only available from me. And I plan to keep it that way, so I can continue to charge \$250 a set."

"People actually pay \$250 for a set of guitar strings?"

"Sure. These are professional musicians, playing \$5,000 instruments. I get orders from all over the world through my website. In all honesty, I don't get much walk-in traffic here. The online sales are what keep me going. So, what do you think of that guitar?"

"It's amazing. How much is it?"

"\$4,500, including the strings."

"Whoa." Luci carefully handed the guitar back to Amy. "That's way too steep for me. Why is it so expensive?"

"Because it's hand-made. Most of these guitars were built by a wonderful old luthier who lives down in LaGrange."

"What's a luthier?"

"A person who makes stringed instruments."

"Well, don't you have anything cheaper?"

"Yes. There on the back wall I've got a couple of Japanese guitars, and a few from Spain. But they're not hand-made."

"That's okay." Luci got up and walked toward the cheap instruments. On her way, she was startled by a cat that was sitting on the counter. It was frozen in place. She looked more closely. "What's this? It looks so real."

"It is real. My 20-year-old son is an amateur taxidermist. When he was 12 years old, his dog died, so we buried it in the back yard. But he couldn't stand to lose his best friend, so that night he did a little research on the internet. And the next day, he dug up Fluffy and performed his first taxidermy.

It was a mess. Looked like some kind of furry alien. But he's really improved over the years. I've lost track of how many little animals he's killed and stuffed."

"So, he killed this poor little cat?"

"Not on purpose. It kept running into the store every time a customer came in. So, he would shoo it out with a stick. But one day he accidentally whacked it on the head and killed it. Then he asked me if he could stuff it. I didn't see any harm."

Luci walked to the back wall, picked up a guitar, and began to strum it. "Does your husband help you run the store?"

"My husband was killed in a car accident."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She hung the guitar back on the wall. "Wait. I think I read about it in the paper. That's why your name sounded familiar. Wasn't that just a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yes."

Luci walked over to where a stuffed squirrel was sitting. "Did Casey do this one too?"

"Yes, he did." Amy wondered how Luci knew her son's name.

Luci bent down and looked directly into the squirrel's eyes. "It's so life-like." Then she pulled back, as though she wasn't absolutely sure it was dead.

"Yes, he's getting really good at it."

"Well, if you don't mind me asking—are you sure your husband was actually in the car when it went over the cliff? I read that they never found his body."

"All I know is, we were having our annual Christmas party with twenty of his old college buddies and their wives, when Carl realized we were running out of beer. So, he drove the Mustang down to the 7-Eleven to get more. But when he came back, he raced up our driveway, plowed through the backyard fence and went over the fifty-foot cliff—right into Lake Erie. The police think the accelerator got stuck, or that maybe Carl was drunk, and he thought he was stepping on the brake. I was visiting with some of the women, and didn't even know he was gone."

"I read that the top was down on the car. Why would he put the top down in twenty degree weather?"

"Because he thought it made him look cool. I told him, 'Carl, you're 40 years old—you don't look cool anymore, no matter what you're driving.' But he'd do it anyway—especially when he'd been drinking."

"Well, maybe he survived somehow," said Luci.

"We're clinging to that hope. But it's been two weeks, so... I can't believe I'm discussing this with a total stranger. I haven't opened up to anybody about the accident until now."

"Well, I'm glad I could help you get it off your chest."

"Kinda makes me want to share something else with you."

"Like what?"

Amy grinned. "Like how I make my \$250 guitar strings."

"Oh, that's okay."

"But I really want to show you. Come on."

Luci reluctantly followed her around the counter and through the door. "Smells funny back here."

"Yeah. It's the mold. I've got to take care of that soon. But you get used to it after a few minutes." Amy opened another door and led Luci inside a large room with no windows.

There was a small lamp sitting on a work bench. But Luci's eyes were drawn to the round table in the middle of the room. A dim light bulb suspended above the table barely illuminated four men playing poker.

"Carl!" Luci ran toward the table. "Carl, you're alive! Why didn't you call me, Honey?"

Thank you, thought Amy. She reached into the workbench drawer for the pistol and then began to walk toward Luci. Now I know for sure that you're The One.

"Carl?" Luci screamed. Then she turned to Amy. "What have you done? You killed him! And then you let that freak Casey stuff him! Well, you're not gonna get away with it! Do you know who I am?"

Amy raised the pistol and pointed it at Luci. "I didn't know who you were when you first came in. But now I do. You're the bumbling police detective who shot the Mayor's brother-in-law in the arm."

"I was just doing my job. It looked like he was about to attack the mayor."

"Too bad they put you on desk duty and took away your gun. It would have come in handy right about now, huh?"

"Why did you kill Carl? I was in love with him."

"That's why. Because he was having an affair with you. And I had warned him after his last fling that if he ever did it again, I would kill him. Apparently, he didn't believe me."

"So, you set the whole thing up? Ran his car off the cliff? Was he even in the car?"

"No. Casey called him while he was at the 7-Eleven and told him our van had stalled in a nearby dark, empty parking lot. When Carl came to help, Casey hit him over the head with a pipe wrench and killed him. Then he threw his body into the back of the van."

"He tossed several big blocks of ice into the Mustang and drove it back to the house. Carl's buddies had moved their cars to the street to give him a clear path down the driveway."

"Casey got out of the car and moved the ice blocks to the driver's side of the floorboard, depressing the accelerator. Everybody inside the house heard the screeching tires and the roaring engine, and rushed outside to see what was happening. One of the guys made it out the door just in time to see the Mustang going over the cliff."

"It was a daring plan. If the car had veered off to one side or the other...but it didn't. I was so proud of Casey."

Luci sobbed. "You didn't have to kill him! Why didn't you just divorce him?"

"Because he would have wanted half of my business—even though he never lifted a finger to help me run it."

"So, he wasn't even in the car when it went into the lake."

"That's right. And the ice blocks just floated away, leaving no evidence of foul play. Brilliant, huh?"

"What are you going to do with me? Surely you're not going to kill me—I'm a cop. My car's sitting out front. And what would you do with my body?"

"Well, let's see...the car's no problem. It'll be stolen before midnight, and chopped into spare parts by morning. You see, this neighborhood does have its advantages. And, as far as what to do with your body...I'm sure I'll think of something. But don't worry—only the best will do for my husband's lover."

"No, no. I was in love with him—I don't deny that. But we were just friends."

"So, you weren't lovers?"

"No, not at all. We just spent a lot of time talking."

"In hotel rooms."

"Yes."

"I see."

Luci felt that Amy might not shoot her as long as they kept talking. "Why did you kill these other men?"

"I needed the raw material."

"Raw material?"

"For my strings."

"You said your strings were man-made!"

Amy gave Luci a sinister grin.

"You killed these men just so you could make guitar strings?"

"Sure. These men and many others. I told you I make most of my money through online sales. Why do

you think I bother with walk-in traffic?"

"To get raw material? What did you do with the rest of the bodies?"

"We just flush them down into the sewer system. Pretty easy—if you have a commercial meat grinder. And it's a shame, really. The typical candidate is a loner that nobody particularly likes or understands. Once I had put that first guy out of his misery, I did a little experimenting and discovered what wonderful strings I could make. Practically overnight, I had a real business. So, that's why my strings sound so good." She raised the pistol, ready to fire. "And now I'm going to enjoy the sound of you dying."

"Wait. The people in the store next door will hear the gunshot. You can't shoot me in here."

"Good point." Amy lowered the gun.

Luci relaxed a little bit. Maybe she really could talk her way out of this mess.

She didn't hear Casey sneaking up behind her.

* * * * *

Casey listened, as his mother played the Bach arrangement on her guitar. When she finished, he said, "That sounds amazing, Mom. What do you plan to name this batch of strings?"

She handed him a freshly printed string box label, and he read the name.

Amy Strings – Luci nell'anima.

Casey said, "What language is this?"

"It's Italian. It means 'Shine your light into the soul.'"

"That's beautiful."

"Thanks." Amy turned her head. "What do you think, Luci?"

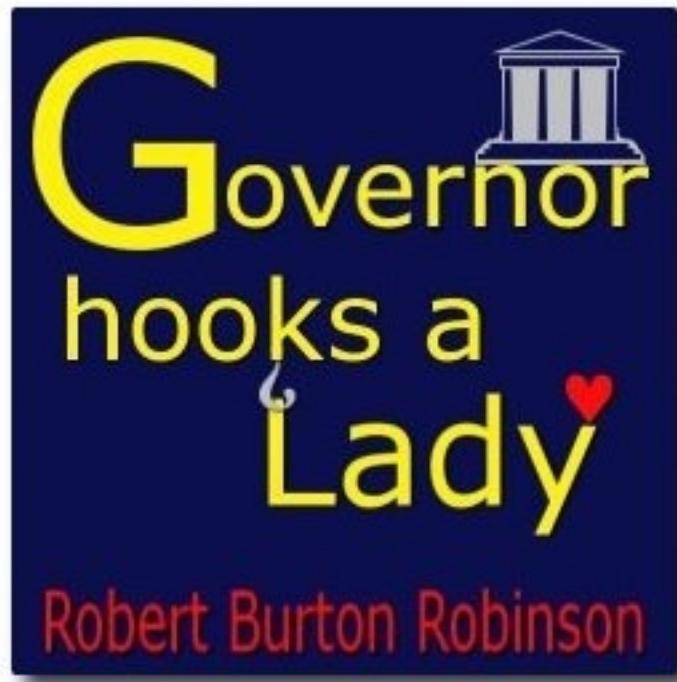
Luci didn't respond.

Casey said, "From the look on her face, I'd say she approves."

Luci sat at the poker table, motionless, smiling at her lover, Carl.

THE END

GOVERNOR HOOKS A LADY



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GENRE: Humor. LENGTH: 762 words. SYNOPSIS: The new governor is flying high—until a certain lady brings him back down to earth.

* * * * *

"I'm just not comfortable with this, Lucas."

"Look, Henry, it's just another task. You've always done everything I asked of you without question. This should be no different."

"But, Sir, it is different. You're the youngest governor the people of this state have ever elected. Honestly, I wasn't sure we could pull it off. But we did. And now that we're here, we just can't take chances anymore. The other side would do anything to bring you down. And if word of this ever leaked out—"

"—just set it up exactly as I told you and nobody will ever know. She'll never see me. She'll never even hear my voice." The governor stood up from his enormous desk—a not-so-subtle hint for his long-time advisor to leave.

Henry stood up, but was not ready to go. "What if she doesn't follow the instructions? What if she turns on the lights?"

"No problem. I've got the National Guard at my disposal. I'll just give them a call and—"

"—Sir, this is not funny. If anybody ever finds out, you're dead in the water. And it's not just you. What about your staff? You're putting us all at risk. So, you see, Sir—it's not really worth it."

The governor turned around and gazed out across the finely-manicured lawn below. "Just do it, Henry. And get out of my office—you're starting to irritate me. You don't want to irritate the most powerful man in the state, now do you, Henry?"

"No, Sir." He paused. "I'll take care of it, Sir."

* * * * *

Creamy was not her real name. Philip had bestowed that lovely alias upon her some two months earlier. When she had first approached him, he'd been hesitant to hire her. But after clients began to rave about her skills and ask for her by name, he knew he had made the right decision. She had quickly become a prime money-maker.

So, it was no surprise that Philip had chosen her for this \$2,000 job. He'd finally made the big-time. And he wanted to be absolutely sure this special john got his money's worth.

Creamy had been impressed when Philip told her the location for the job. She'd spent a few nights within the ornate walls of the fancy hotel, but never transacted any business there.

Philip had gone over the instructions with her at least five times. She pushed on the door and it opened, as expected. A key card dropped to the floor. She realized that the client had lodged it between the door lock and the frame.

She quickly stepped inside. In the split second before the door closed she saw that the john was in bed, with the sheet pulled over his head. This too was expected.

At first, all she could see was the moonlight seeping in at the edges of the curtain. As her eyes began to adjust, she located the outline of the bed.

Her instructions stipulated that neither she nor the john would speak. Moaning, panting, and heavy breathing were all good—but no talking was allowed.

She stripped down to her negligee. She wasn't quite sure how to handle the no-talking rule. Some of the most effective tools in her arsenal were verbal. She could really get a guy going with what she said—and the way she said it. So, this would be her greatest challenge.

Creamy lifted the edge of the sheet and slid into bed with the mystery man. Wait—did she know for certain it was a man?

The governor began to put his hands all over her body.

Feels like a man's hands, she thought.

First, he felt her chest. Very nice, he thought. And he liked her flat stomach. The thighs were firm. At any moment he would rip off her flimsy nightie and get down to business. He loved getting down to business—as a litigator, as lieutenant governor, as governor, as a lover. In each and every capacity, he was voracious and insatiable.

Creamy sensed that he was about to attack. She could handle whatever he threw at her. But she wondered what he looked like. She ran her fingers through his hair and began to feel his face. Then she felt a small mole at the top of his left ear. She quickly checked below the earlobe—and found the *other* mole. She knew she wasn't supposed to speak, but she couldn't help herself. "Lucas?"

The governor jumped back in horror. "Mother??!!!"

THE END

HORRORS OF MEMORY



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GENRE: Suspense. LENGTH: 1612 words. SYNOPSIS: 90-year-old Mildred Applee is thankful she still has an excellent memory—until a surgical procedure makes her blessing seem more like a curse.

* * * * *

“Mrs. Applee, have you had anything to eat or drink since midnight?”

“Well, let’s see. I had steak and eggs and two biscuits for breakfast,” said Mildred. “Oh, and two cups of coffee.”

The nurse stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m kidding. I know the rules. This is not my first surgery.”

Karen Applee glared. “Mom—behave.”

“Remember when you had your tonsils out, Honey, back in 1947? We bought you that Betsy Wetsy doll. Then we accidentally went off and left it at the hospital. And when your dad went back to get it, it was gone. You cried and cried for that doll.”

“Okay, Mom. No, I don’t remember that. But I believe you.” Karen turned to the nurse. “My mother has a memory like a computer.”

“And guess how old I am,” said Mildred.

The nurse checked the chart in her hand. “Says here you’re 90.”

“That’s right. And I never forget a thing.”

“Well, that’s very impressive,” said the nurse with no particular interest. “The anesthetist will be in shortly.” She turned and walked away.

“I hate being put under,” said Mildred to her daughter.

"You'd rather be awake while they cut on you?"

"I think I could take it."

A young female doctor walked in. "Hi, Mrs. Applee. I'm Dr. Johnson, your anesthetist."

"Oh, Doctor, looks like my mother won't be needing your services."

"Karen," said Mildred.

"Oh. You're canceling the surgery?" said the doctor.

"No," said Karen. "She wants to stay awake for the surgery."

The doctor's eyes widened.

"I was only kidding," said Mildred. "My goodness, Karen—can't you tell when I'm joking?"

Karen smiled at the doctor. "My mother is a big bluffer. Sometimes I just have to call her on it."

The doctor smiled back, and then looked at Mildred. "Well, I can assure, Mrs. Applee, that you don't want to have to bluff your way through this procedure."

"No, of course not." Mildred stuck out her tongue at her daughter.

Dr. Johnson assured Mrs. Applee that she would keep her comfortable throughout the surgery. Then she took out a syringe and injected a drug into Mildred's IV. "This will help you relax."

Two orderlies came in and unlocked the bed wheels and began rolling Mildred toward the surgery room.

"Love you, Honey. See you later."

"Love you, Mom."

* * * * *

"How are you feeling, Mom?"

"Okay, I guess." Mildred surveyed the room. "How long was I in surgery?"

"About thirty minutes. But then you were in recovery for nearly two hours."

"Wow. I must have really been knocked out. What time is it?"

Karen checked her watch. "A little after five."

"Oh, my goodness. I can't believe I've been asleep all this time."

Karen looked confused. "Mom, you've been awake. They brought you here to your room over an hour ago."

"Did I say anything to you when they brought me in?"

"Yeah. You said you were thirsty. So, I gave you some Sprite. And then I fed you a few crackers."

"Oh, yeah. Now I remember. My mouth so dry that I could barely swallow or even chew."

"But the Sprite helped."

"That's right. Now it's coming back." Mildred thought for a few seconds. "Boy, when they put you out, you're really out."

"That's what you want, Mom. It's a lot better than feeling the knife."

"But I don't even remember rolling into the surgery room."

"You don't?"

"No. I remember saying goodbye to you and then...nothing."

"That stuff works fast."

"Oh, Karen, what about Ed? You need to get home and make your husband some dinner."

"He can order pizza, Mom. It's no big deal."

"No, no, Honey. You get on home. I'm fine. Come see me in the morning."

"Are you sure? We could come up tonight."

"I appreciate that, Honey, but I'll probably be sleeping anyway. If you come you'll just be waking me up."

"Well...okay—if you're sure."

* * * * *

Mildred had been asleep for forty minutes when she heard the elevator doors close. Two men, presumably orderlies, began to talk.

"So, it's got to be tonight. Once I silence the alarm I can disconnect her and just let her fade away. Then

I'll reconnect everything and the alarm will go off. You just make sure nobody walks in on me."

"Right."

"Because remember: I'm taking most of the risk, but you're getting half of the money."

"Don't worry, Man—I'll have your back."

Mildred took a peek. She saw one of the men twisting a silver ring on his right index finger. She quickly closed her eyes. What money? she wondered. All she had was the house.

She heard the elevator doors open and felt herself being wheeled out, and down a hallway.

She could feel her body being transferred from the bed to the operating table.

After some talking in the distance that she couldn't quite make out, she heard: "Okay, then. Here we go."

Mildred recognized the voice. It was her surgeon.

She felt a sharp pain in her stomach.

No, wait—I'm awake! Help! Somebody help me! But she could not speak. She couldn't open her eyes.

She would scream, if only in her mind, until her face turned blue. Then the surgeon would notice, and stop cutting her.

Mildred jerked and woke up.

What a horrific nightmare. She gently touched the area of her surgery. It was the exact location as in her dream.

Then she noticed that the other bed was now occupied.

"Hi, there, Neighbor. What's your name? I'm Mildred."

No answer.

"What are you in for?" Sounded like prison talk. Mildred felt like a prisoner after that nightmare.

Still no answer.

It would have been nice to have someone to talk to. A fellow veteran from the trenches of surgery.

A nurse walked in. "Here's a little something to help you sleep, Mrs. Applee."

"Oh, I don't think I'm going to need any help."

"Well, the doctor ordered it, so..."

As Mildred took the little paper cup with two pills in it, she prayed that the orderlies in her dream were not real. Who wanted to be sound asleep in a hospital where killers were roaming the halls?

She dumped the pills into her mouth.

The nurse handed her a glass of water, and Mildred drank part of it.

"Sweet dreams," said the nurse, as she walked out.

Mildred stuck her finger into her mouth, dug the two pills out from under her tongue, and stashed them under her pillow. She couldn't believe she had pulled it off—just like in the movies.

But after a few minutes, she got sleepy anyway and dozed off.

The stinky breath is what woke her up. Onion and garlic with a dash of stale tobacco. But she didn't open her eyes.

Then she heard the person walk away from her bed. She opened one eye just enough to see an orderly pushing buttons on the medical equipment that was hooked up to her roommate.

It hadn't been a dream after all. It was happening right now. The poor woman in the other bed was being murdered! She quietly reached for the button on her bedrail and pressed it. Aha! Gotcha, Sucker!

"May I help you?" said the nurse over the speaker.

"Help! He's trying to—"

A large hand clamped onto her mouth.

"It's okay, Jessie," said the orderly, "I'll handle it."

"Okay, thanks."

No, no, no! thought Mildred. He's killing that woman. And now he's going to kill me!

The orderly jabbed her arm with a syringe.

She blacked out.

* * * * *

"Mom? Mother?"

Mildred suddenly woke up. "Oh, Karen. I'm so glad you're here." She checked to see if her roommate was okay. The bed was empty. There was no trace of the woman.

"What's the matter?"

"There was a woman in that bed last night. And this orderly came in and disconnected all her life support—and killed her."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"I saw him doing it. So, I pushed the button to call the nurse. But he covered my mouth and then shot me up with something."

"Do you realize how crazy you sound, Mom?"

"I don't care—it really happened."

"Alright. Fine. Let me go talk to the nurse."

Karen came back in five minutes. "There was never another patient in here with you, Mom. But you were yelling in your sleep last night. So, they gave you an extra dose of sleep medication."

Mildred was stunned. Her memory was finally beginning to fail her. She hoped it was just a side effect of the drugs they gave her during surgery.

"When can I go home?"

"You're already approved to go."

"Good. Let's get out of here."

* * * * *

A nurse and an orderly watched from a distance while another orderly rolled Mildred's wheelchair into the elevator. Then Karen stepped in, and the doors closed.

The orderly said, "That poor old woman had terrible nightmares last night."

"But I think she deserved to know the truth."

"And what if she told the media her wild story? Just imagine some investigative reporter nosing around here asking all kinds of questions about an orderly killing a patient. We have a hard enough time getting any respect."

"I know."

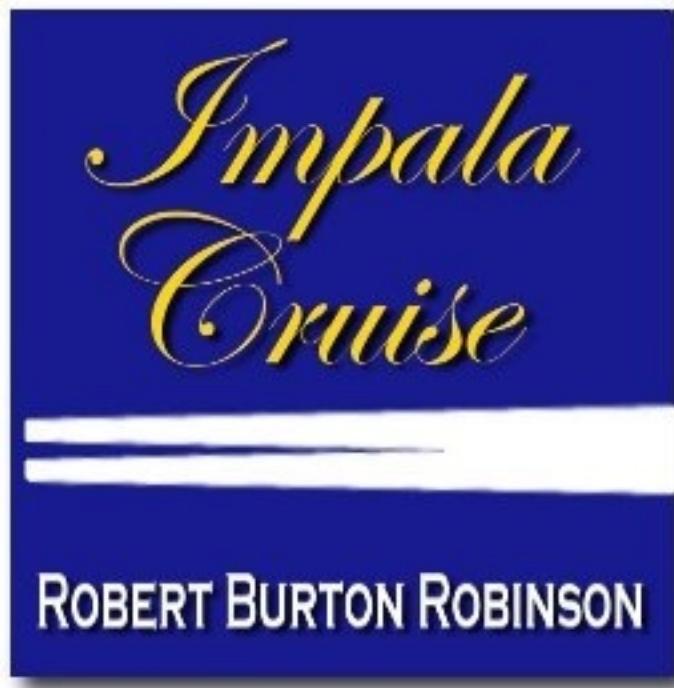
"It was just a crazy old woman's nightmare. But the TV station would try to turn into a scandal—just for the ratings."

"Yeah. But what if she finds out there really was another patient in the room with her? Then she'll think we lied about it to cover up a murder."

"Oh, come on—you can't be serious." A murder? Right here under our noses? That's ridiculous," said the orderly, as he twisted the silver ring on his right index finger.

THE END

IMPALA CRUISE



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GENRE: Suspense. LENGTH: 5,629 words. SYNOPSIS: A young woman offers a ride to a stranger, knowing she may regret it. He's good-looking. But he could be a criminal. He could be dangerous. So could she.

* * * *

The young clerk smiled at Obadiah as he entered the convenience store. He already felt guilty about what he was about to do. Her smile had just made it that much more difficult. He went straight to the back and began eying the wall of refrigerated beer. His whole body vibrated with anticipation, even as his blood sugar level plummeted.

How had he sunk this low? Had he lost all sense of morality? Obadiah brushed his guilt aside. The only way to pull it off was to do it without thinking. He wanted to be back on the road in two minutes, with a cold beer in hand, an open bag of Fritos on the seat beside him, and wads of cash stuffed in his coat pockets. Unfortunately, he no longer owned a car.

Just do it. He opened the glass door and grabbed a six-pack of Budweiser.

Then he heard somebody walk into the store. He froze. The police, he thought. Somehow the clerk had suspected him and called for help. Why had he been so foolish? It was after 11:00 p.m., and this was a small town, so he thought it would be easy.

Then he heard a man's voice.

"Give me a pack of Marlboro Reds."

Obadiah relaxed. It was just a customer. And the man would never even know Obadiah was there. Since there were no cars parked out front, the guy would assume he was the only customer.

"Now give me all your money, Bitch!"

"Please...please don't shoot me—I have a two-year old."

"Hurry up! Just dump the whole drawer in the bag."

"Okay, okay. But there's not much in here. Most of the money is in the safe."

"Then crack it open!"

Obadiah wished he was anywhere but here. The guy sounded crazy. Would he kill the girl?

"But...I don't know the combination."

Obadiah bent over and tiptoed to the middle aisle to take a look. He could either continue to hide and be safe, or try to help the girl and possibly die. No! I just can't deal with this right now, he thought. His head throbbed. His hands began to shake.

"Yes, you do," shouted the man with the gun. "And you're gonna open it right now or I'm gonna blow your head off!"

The girl began to sob. "Please don't hurt me."

Obadiah stayed low as he hurried up the aisle. Just as he was about to grab the man's arm from behind and try to wrestle the gun away from him, the girl spotted him.

Her eyes tipped off the robber. He spun around.

Obadiah grabbed the man's right arm with both of his hands, and the pistol went off. The bullet blew past Obadiah's ear, and tore into the ceiling.

The girl hit the floor and pushed the silent alarm button.

The man struggled to break free. But Obadiah knew if he let go he was dead.

The man jabbed Obadiah in the face with his left fist.

Obadiah grabbed the man's left forearm, leaving only one hand to control the gun. He felt weak. He hadn't eaten all day. Adrenaline was no longer enough. He was losing the battle. Soon a red-hot chunk of metal would be lodged in his brain.

Maybe it was for the best. He deserved to die. But what about the girl? The robber would have to kill her too. He fought back with renewed strength. But he knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

The robber gasped and looked down.

Obadiah looked too, and saw what appeared to be the tip of a steel-toed work boot—jammed deep into the man's crotch from behind.

Obadiah quickly took advantage of the man's weakness, snatching the gun away.

The man bent over in agony, holding himself with both hands, assessing the damage.

The same work boot that had flattened his manhood kicked him in the back. He fell to the floor.

His assailant was a woman—5-foot-6, with short brown hair, wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and...steel-toed boots. She was cute—in a kiss me, and I'll break your arm kind of way. Right now, Obadiah wouldn't care if she broke his arm. "Thanks."

"No problem." She took out her cell phone. "Now keep the gun on him while I call the police."

The clerk peeped up from behind the counter. "I've already called them."

The police arrived moments later, took statements, and hauled the man away.

The young clerk repeatedly thanked Obadiah and the boot woman. The police had taken her name, but Obadiah didn't catch it. He had been too busy answering the questions of another officer.

The boot woman walked out and got into her big blue, 1970-something car.

Obadiah began walking along the road, wondering how long he would survive without food. He tried not to think about the beer and Fritos.

The big blue car passed him and pulled over.

When he reached the car and looked in through the open passenger window, she said, "Get in."

Oh, Lady, he thought, you think I'm a nice guy because I tried to stop the robbery and save that clerk. I'm not nice. You need to stay away from me.

But even in the dim light of the instrument panel he saw an irresistible sparkle in her eyes.

Obadiah opened the door and got in.

He buckled his seat belt as she drove out onto the road. "Thanks again for saving me back there."

"No problem," she said. "I heard you tell the cop that your name is Obadiah Cross. Obadiah's from the Bible, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"So, what are you—some kind of preacher?"

"Look, just because your parents named you after somebody in the Bible, it doesn't mean you'll grow up religious."

"Yeah, that's true. Not every Mary is a virgin."

He looked straight ahead.

She studied his face. "You didn't answer my question."

"What? Am I a preacher?" He hesitated. "No." Not anymore, he thought.

"Well, you look like one."

"No, I don't. And what about you? I'll bet your name doesn't say anything about who you are either. What is your name? I never caught it."

"Impala."

"Oh, come on. You can do better than that. If you're going to lie about it, at least make it believable."

"I'm not lying. That's my name."

"Really? You don't think I know what kind of car this is? I'm not much of a car guy, but the logo's right here on the dash. I saw it when I got in. So, what's your last name? Chevy? Are you Miss Impala Chevy?"

"No, of course not. That wouldn't work. The correct order is Chevy Impala."

"Okay. Then what is your last name?"

"Cruise."

He checked to see if she was smiling. She was not. He began to laugh.

It didn't faze her. "Go ahead. Get it out of your system."

"You're serious. Your name is really 'Impala Cruise'."

"That's right."

"Why? Why in the world—"

"—would my parents give me such a crazy name? Most people ask me if they were on drugs at the time."

"Well—yeah. That would explain it."

"Actually, it made perfect sense to name me Impala...since I was born in the back seat of the car."

"Your mom didn't make it to the hospital in time."

"Hey, when I'm ready to go, nobody's gonna stop me. I've always been that way."

"So, who delivered you? Your dad?"

"Yep. And that's why he could never bring himself to get rid of this car. He just kept fixing it up."

"This car?" He turned to take a look at the back seat. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

Obadiah had guessed twenty-one. He was twenty-six.

"This is a '72 model. It was my sixteenth birthday present."

"Okay. Glad to meet you, Impala."

She nodded.

"But you made up the last name, right? You don't want to give me your real last name because then I could track you down later. You're scared of me."

"Oh, yeah, I'm scared of you," she said sarcastically. "That's why I busted the bad guy's balls for you. That's why I gave you a ride—because I'm scared to death of you."

"You're right. I'm being stupid."

"You're probably just hungry. You can't think straight. How about a hamburger?"

"That sounds great."

She pointed to a McDonald's billboard. It was five miles ahead.

"Only thing is...I don't have any money."

"They take credit cards."

"Mine are all maxed out."

She thought for moment. "How were you going to buy that beer at the convenience store if you didn't

have any money?"

"I was...uh..."

"You were gonna rob it. You're no better than that other guy. He just beat you to it. I should have let him shoot you."

Obadiah hung his head.

She let him mope for a while and then punched him in the arm. "Get over it. I'll pay for the burgers."

"Why? I'm a criminal. Don't you want to pull over and throw me out of your car?"

"I should."

"Do it."

"Nope. Gotta get you back home safe and sound."

"I don't have a home."

"Yeah, you do. In Beaumont."

He stared at her. "What makes you think I'm from Beau-mont? It's 200 miles from here."

She looked as if she realized she'd said too much.

"Zeela sent you. I should have known. How much is she paying you?"

"Zeela? Who's that?"

"Don't play dumb. It's too late for that."

"She's not paying me anything."

"Oh, I get it. You're working off a debt. You jumped bail and now you're having to pay her back."

"She's a friend."

"My mother doesn't have any friends. She helps creeps get out of jail—for money."

"It's a legitimate business."

"It's a racket."

"Fine. Whatever. She's worried about you. That's why I came."

"Well, you just go back and tell her to mind her own business. I don't need her pity."

"It's not pity."

"Pull over." He reached for the door handle, as though he might jump out before she even slowed down.

She eased up on the accelerator. "What about the hamburger? And fries?"

"I don't care." But he couldn't convince himself—much less her.

"Let's eat first. Then we can go our separate ways."

Obadiah didn't care if he ever saw Zeela again. As long as he stayed away, he could blame all his troubles on her. If she had just let him live his life as he saw fit, and not tried to control him, things could have turned out so differently.

He sensed a car approaching from the rear and turned around. The headlights blinded him.

Impala glared into the rear view mirror. "What's your problem, Man? If you're in such a hurry, just pass me."

Obadiah froze. Was it him? Had he seen Obadiah getting into the car? What if he had a gun?

The car raced around them and speed away.

Obadiah sighed, "Whew."

"What?"

"That car...he almost hit us."

"If he had, he would have been sorry."

"What do you mean?"

"This thing is a tank. It's forty-three-hundred pounds of heavy-duty steel. They don't make 'em like this anymore."

"No, I guess not."

False alarm. But he knew his killer was coming. It was only a matter of time.

* * * * *

Obadiah gobbled down two Big Macs, a super-sized fry, and a Coke while Impala ate her chicken

sandwich. Every few seconds, his eyes did a quick scan of the room. "Ever feel like somebody's watching you?"

"I'm watching you," she said. "And it ain't pretty."

"I'm sorry. I was starving." He sucked down the last of his soft drink. "I need to...make a call."

"Okay. Wanna borrow my cell?"

"Not that kind of call." He nodded toward the restrooms.

Oh, I get it, she thought, euphemism. "Local or long distance?"

"Long distance, I'm afraid."

"No problem. I'm gonna get a large coffee to go. You want one too?"

"That would be great. Thanks."

The restroom was empty. Obadiah went into the lone stall. He had just sat down when he heard somebody else walk in.

"Did you really think you could get away from me?"

It was Jim. Obadiah stopped breathing. Maybe if he kept quiet...

"I'm talking to you!" Jim kicked the side of the stall. "Say something!" He kicked it again.

Obadiah was struck with the words of his Biblical name-sake: What have I sinned, that thou wouldest deliver thy servant into the hand of Ahab, to slay me? But he knew exactly what his sins were. And this was judgment day. It would be fitting, he thought—for him to die half-naked in a public restroom.

"Come out of there and face me like a man, you coward!" Jim kicked the stall even harder.

"I'm coming out," said Obadiah. He stood and pulled up his pants. Then he heard somebody else come into the restroom.

"What's going on in here?"

Obadiah recognized Impala's voice.

"It's none of your business, Lady. Get out of here."

"You're wrong. It is my business. That's my boyfriend."

"It's okay," said Obadiah. He opened the stall door and stepped out.

Jim reached under his jacket and produced a large hunting knife. "You ever field dress a deer, Obadiah?"

"Whoa. Put the knife away, Buddy," said Impala, "before somebody gets hurt."

Jim ignored her. "You start by inserting the blade at the bottom of the sternum. Of course, with a deer, I make sure the animal's dead first. But with you, I see no need to be humane." He began to walk toward Obadiah, who stepped backward until he was against the wall.

Impala was ten feet behind Jim, clenching her teeth. "Put the knife down."

Jim stepped in closer to Obadiah. "Imagine how she felt...just before she died."

"I'm sorry," said Obadiah. "I'm truly sorry."

"Oh, I know you are—now. But I have no sympathy for you whatsoever, because you knew better. And everybody trusted you. She trusted you. And you used her. You killed her!"

Obadiah prayed to see Impala's steel-toed boot fly up between Jim's legs. But maybe she didn't want to save him this time. Perhaps she was having second thoughts about him—after what she was hearing.

"Get ready to meet your maker," said Jim. "Tell him you're sorry." He lurched forward, pushing Obadiah's arms upward with his left arm, exposing Obadiah's chest. He reared back with the knife—oblivious to the fact that Impala was running toward him from behind.

She jumped into the air and landed her boots at the back of his knees, causing his legs to buckle. He went down backwards. Impala hopped out of the way. His head slammed on the ceramic tile floor. She stomped his forearm and grabbed the knife out of his hand.

Jim was dazed, but conscious. "Why are you helping him? He's a murderer."

"Forget about Obadiah," she said.

"But you don't understand."

"Look—whatever he's done, I'm sure he'll pay for it. Just stay away from him. Or next time...I'll kill you."

Obadiah tiptoed his way around him. Impala wrapped the knife in paper towels and put it under her left arm.

As they came out of the restroom, Impala picked up the coffees she had left on a table. She handed one to Obadiah and they walked out of the restaurant.

She threw the knife into the woods. They got into the car and drove away.

After a few minutes of silence, Obadiah said, "Thanks for rescuing me—again. But I'm still not going to Beaumont."

"Well, that's where this car is going. So..." She slowed the car down and began to pull off to side of the road.

"What are you doing?"

"You're either going all the way or not at all."

"Oh, come on, Impala. Surely you're not going to just leave me out here on a dark highway in the middle of nowhere."

"It's not the middle of nowhere. You can walk back to the McDonald's. It's five miles, tops."

"I'm not going back there."

"Afraid you might run into the deer hunter?"

"That would be preferable to running into Zeela."

"How can you say that? She's your mother. She loves you."

"I don't need her kind of love."

"Look. It won't kill you to just talk to her. Ten minutes—that's all I ask. Then you can do whatever you want."

"How about a compromise? Drop me off in Silsbee. I've got an old friend who lives there. Then, after I get up my nerve, I'll go into Beaumont and pay a visit to Zeela."

"Hmm. I'll have to think about it." She pulled back onto the road. It's only two hours or so, which is going to put us there at 3:00 in the morning. So, we might as well stop at a motel and get some rest."

"You do remember that I don't have any money?"

"I've got it covered."

Obadiah did need rest. But he wasn't sure he could relax enough to fall asleep. He could almost feel Jim's knife in his chest.

Impala had spotted a Motel 6 billboard a few miles back. They were getting close.

She glanced over at Obadiah. "So, where's your car?"

"Huh?"

"A guy like you has a car. Where is it?"

"It got repossessed."

"Where's your stuff? You don't even have a backpack."

"Don't rub it in."

"I guess that's why you were gonna rob that convenience store."

He looked away.

"How did you get in such bad shape? Weren't you a pastor of a church?"

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"When I graduated from the seminary, I was contacted by the search committee of a small country church. I went there 'in view of a call' one Sunday. 'In view of a call' means—"

"—I know. It means you went there to preach and meet everybody, for them to decide if they wanted you as their pastor."

Obadiah looked surprised.

"Zeela explained it to me."

"Oh. Well, I ended up accepting the call. And it was wonderful...for the first year or so."

"Isn't it unusual for a pastor to be single?"

"It's not the norm. But they really liked me. And everything was fine...until this young woman came to me for counseling."

"Was she pretty?"

"Yes."

"But married, right?"

"She and her husband were having problems. They'd only been married two years. I told her their issues were fixable."

"But then you made a move on her."

"No. She's the one who made the move. One day she broke down in my office and started crying. I tried to console her, and then...she kissed me." Obadiah's guilt overcame him for a moment. "One thing led to another..."

"You had an affair with her."

"It didn't last long before I came to my senses. I told her it was over. She said she loved me and threatened to tell her husband if I broke it off."

"But you broke it off anyway, and now her husband wants to kill you. The cowboy in the bathroom with the knife, right?"

"Yeah. But it's much worse than that. She went home and took a handful of sleeping pills. They said it wasn't a lethal dose though, and that she probably would have survived...if she hadn't drowned."

"Drowned?"

Obadiah began to cry. He could barely speak. "She got in the bathtub."

"You loved her."

"I had no right to love her," he shouted, fighting the tears. "Not in that way."

"But it wasn't your fault she killed herself."

"Yes, it was. If I hadn't given into temptation she'd still be alive." Tears gushed down his checks.

"How did her husband find out about the affair? Did she tell him?"

"I don't think so. But he must have suspected that some-thing was going on. And then at the funeral, I think I gave it away. He could probably see it in my eyes. I think everybody could. I resigned the next week. Then he confronted me, and I confessed. He looked like he wanted to kill me right then. But I guess he didn't have his knife with him."

"No. He just wasn't mad enough yet. He could have stabbed you with a letter opener."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said Obadiah. "I had to get out of the parsonage right away, so I threw some clothes in my car and took off. I tried to get a job, but nothing worked out. I ran out of money and started sleeping in my car. Then my car broke down."

"Man, you've had nothing but bad luck."

"Luck has nothing to do with it. God is punishing me."

"You're punishing yourself," she said. "Here it is." She pulled into the motel parking lot and drove up to the lobby entrance.

After Impala had checked them in, she drove around to their room and they went inside. She insisted that Obadiah shower first.

"Okay. But you know I don't have any fresh clothes to change into. I don't even have anything to sleep in."

"That's no problem. Sleep in the buff. Your clothes can air out overnight."

"Well, I..."

"Just wear a towel." She winked at him.

Obadiah went into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard Impala on the phone, but he didn't much care who she was talking to. Probably Zeela. Whatever. If he had to meet with her, he would. But he would not stick around for long. That much he knew.

When he was finished, he came out of the bathroom with one towel around his waist and another draped over his shoulders.

"Hope you saved a couple of towels for me."

"I did."

"Okay. Sleep well," said Impala as she went into the bath-room.

He pulled back the covers, let his towels drop to the floor and got into bed. Obadiah was not accustomed to sleeping in the nude.

He ran his hands across the sheets, trying to determine if they were fresh. Maybe the maid skipped the sheet washing occasionally. His bare skin could well be rubbing up against the dried sweat of a previous night's lathery sex. He considered holding the sheet up to his nose for a sniff test. But some things are better left unknown. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

When she came out of the bathroom, he pretended to be asleep.

"You okay?" she said.

He opened his eyes. She was standing beside his bed in a towel. Then she pulled it off—revealing a very naked, sexy body. Impala was much hotter than he would have imagined—if he had even thought about it. Who could think of her in that way? When a woman talks and acts tough and beats up men—you don't tend to think about how womanly she is.

"You like?"

He couldn't find words.

Impala pulled up his covers to take a look. "Nice." She got in with him. His body was going nuts.

"Are you okay?" Suddenly she was standing beside his bed again. But this time she was wearing a baggy T-shirt and gym shorts.

"Uh—yeah." What a dream, he thought.

"Sorry I woke you up. It's just that you were mumbling something."

He gulped. "What did I say?"

"I couldn't quite make it out."

"Well, I'm fine. Really. I'll try not to talk in my sleep anymore."

"Okay. Goodnight." She got into her bed and clicked off the lamp.

His body was still buzzing with titillation. It would be hard to get back to sleep. Not that he minded. And like it or not, he would never see Impala the same way again.

* * * * *

"Hey, Sleepyhead, I'm gonna walk over to Denny's. You hungry?"

Obadiah couldn't believe it was morning. He opened one eye to confirm it, and saw the sunlight seeping in from around the curtains. "Yeah, I guess."

"Well, then hop up and get dressed. I'll get us a table."

When she opened the door it nearly blinded him. She let it slam. He jumped. Might as well get out of bed, he thought. Otherwise, she'd come back and drag him out by the ear.

He found her tube of toothpaste on the sink and helped himself, using his finger as a toothbrush. His clothes smelled slightly better than the night before, but they looked as though they'd been slept in.

As he walked along the front of Denny's toward the entrance, he saw Impala inside. He stepped up to the window for a closer look. Some guy was sitting at the table with her. She seemed to be having a nice conversation with him while sipping coffee.

What did Obadiah think—that he was the only man in her life? Was he actually jealous? That was crazy. He barely even knew her. Their one intimate moment had taken place in a dream.

Obadiah considered just leaving—walking back to the room. But he was hungry. And who the heck was this new guy anyway?

Then he saw the man get up from the table. Impala got up too. She followed him to the cashier and he paid the bill. Obadiah was standing at the door when the two walked out. Impala ignored him.

He started to say something, but decided to wait and see what would happen next. Impala was following the man into the parking lot.

Two police cars screeched into the parking lot. But there were no flashing lights. No sirens. What was the hurry? The Grand Slam breakfast?

The man looked back at Impala. "Sorry, Babe, I gotta go." He made a run for his car.

Impala ran after him.

Obadiah just stood there and watched—amazed and confused.

The man made it to his car and reached for the door handle.

Impala raised her right boot waist high and kicked him in the back, knocking him down.

One of the police cars pulled up behind the man's car, trapping it in place.

By the time the man got to his feet, one of the cops had a pistol aimed at his chest. "Hold it right there!"

The man froze.

Impala walked over to where Obadiah was standing. "Ready to eat?"

"Uh...yeah." He followed her back inside the restaurant while the police handcuffed the man and took him away.

"What was that?"

"Shh," she whispered. "People are already staring at us. Don't make it worse."

Once they were seated, Obadiah said, "Who was that guy?"

"A bail jumper."

Obadiah looked at her in disbelief. "What are you—a bounty hunter? That's it. That's what you do for Zeela—you hunt down bail jumpers."

"No, I'm not a bounty hunter. Not yet. Right now I'm just a secretary. But I've already finished my training."

"So, you're telling me Zeela didn't send you out to catch that guy?"

"No. I just got lucky. In fact, she'll fire me if she finds out I did anything more than calling the police. She could lose her license. But I just kinda fell into it. When I saw him through the window I thought he looked familiar." She held up her phone. "I've got all the pictures and info in here—just in case."

"Just in case you run into one of Zeela's bail jumpers?"

"Yeah. Even though I didn't really think it would ever happen. But there he was—big as Texas. And I knew it was him because I spotted his car."

"Could have been somebody else with the same kind of car."

"Somebody else with a metallic blue '69 Chevelle SS396?"

"Okay. Probably not."

"That thing's got a high performance engine."

"Good to know," he said felicitously. "So, you called the police."

"Yeah. And I tried to keep him inside until they got here, but he was in a hurry to get back on the road."

"Were you actually gonna get in his car?"

"No, of course not. Although I wouldn't mind taking that car out for a spin."

Obadiah shook his head. "Zeela must be awfully proud of you."

Impala stuck her tongue out at him. "Don't you dare tell her I sat and had coffee with him, or that I knocked him down in the parking lot. If she finds out I'm toast."

"Relax. I won't squeal on you." Then it hit Obadiah. He was just another one of Zeela's bail jumpers. He had stepped off the straight and narrow, and now she was reeling him in. He was Impala's first official catch.

Obadiah asked to borrow Impala's cell phone, and called his buddy in Silsbee. The he gave it back to her.

"So, he'll pick you up at Whataburger," she said.

"Yeah. He's moved way out in the country, and he says we'd get lost trying to find his house. Of course, he's gonna be late. Johnny is always late."

"Well, you should have told him 9:00. Then he'd be sitting there waiting for you when we pull in at 9:30."

"I don't mind waiting. Besides, I can't lie to him."

"Oh, that's right—you're a preacher. Or you used to be one."

He looked down and sighed.

"I'm sorry. That was mean."

"Besides, he just came off a graveyard shift."

"What kind of work does he do?"

"He's a welder. They're working a shutdown," said Obadiah. "It means they shut the plant down so they

can do maintenance work on it."

"I know. My uncle is a pipefitter at the Exxon Mobil plant," she said. "Well, are you about ready to go?"

"Sure."

She handed him the car keys and a twenty-dollar bill. "I've got to make a quick trip to the Ladies Room. I'll be right out."

"Okay."

Obadiah paid the bill and walked out to the car.

Impala was alone in the restroom on her cell phone. "...yeah, about 9:30...okay, bye."

* * * * *

They drove into Silsbee at 9:22 a.m.. The Whataburger parking lot was nearly full.

"Well, thanks again for everything," said Obadiah. "And I'll pay you back as soon as I get a job."

"Don't worry about paying me back."

"No. I insist," he said. "But I really could use...just a couple more bucks, if you don't mind."

"For coffee?"

"Yeah. I may be waiting for quite a while."

"No problem. In fact, I'll come in and have a cup with you."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. You probably want to get home." Yet he really wanted her to stay.

She killed the engine. "Let's see how Whataburger coffee compares with Denny's"

They got out and went into the restaurant.

"I'd like two large coffees," said Impala.

Obadiah stood a few feet behind her, looking around the dining area. In the unlikely event that Johnny had already arrived, he was probably asleep in a booth.

Then he spotted Jim—the vengeful, grieving widower. He would never give up until Obadiah was dead. Why not just get it over with? Why not surrender? He had killed Jim's wife just as surely as if he had stabbed her in the heart with a butcher knife.

Jim got up from his table, reached into his jacket, and pulled out a pistol.

This is it, thought Obadiah. I'm a dead man. Fine. I deserve it. Go ahead. Kill me.

But Jim wasn't pointing the gun at Obadiah. He was aiming it at Impala. Why? Was it because of what she had done to him in the McDonald's restroom? It didn't matter why. Adrenaline gushed into Obadiah's bloodstream, as he leaped on Impala.

As they hit the floor, two shots fired in rapid succession.

Obadiah's body was draped over Impala like a human shield. He was certain he'd been hit. The pain would kick at in any moment. But that wasn't the worst of it. Jim wouldn't just walk away. He'd come over and finish the job. And at close range, bullets would go right through his body, into Impala.

"It's okay. He's gone."

Obadiah couldn't believe it. He looked up. "Mom?" Her pistol was still smoking. "You shot him?"

"I got him in the shoulder. He dropped his gun and ran out. He'll be okay if he gets to a hospital soon. The police will pick him up there."

Before Obadiah could respond, Zeela had already walked away, and was on her cell phone talking to the police.

"Good job," said Impala, who was happily lying beneath him.

"Thanks. So, you called Zeela and told her we were coming here."

"And it's a good thing I did."

"Well, since she saved our lives, I guess I'll forgive you." He started to get up.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back down. "How would you like a job? We can be a team."

"A bounty hunter team? No, thanks."

"Sure. You'll quote scripture like a preacher, while I seduce them with charm. And then—"

"—charm?"

"What? You don't think I can be charming?"

"Well..."

She grabbed the back of his head, pulled it down to her, and gave him a long, passionate kiss.

Suddenly Obadiah flashed back to the sexy dream he'd had the night before. Oh, my God, he thought. I'm gonna do whatever this woman tells me to do.

She released the kiss and smiled at him with a sweetness that he would not have thought possible from this butt-kicking woman.

"I'll think about it," he said. But she had him. And they both knew it.

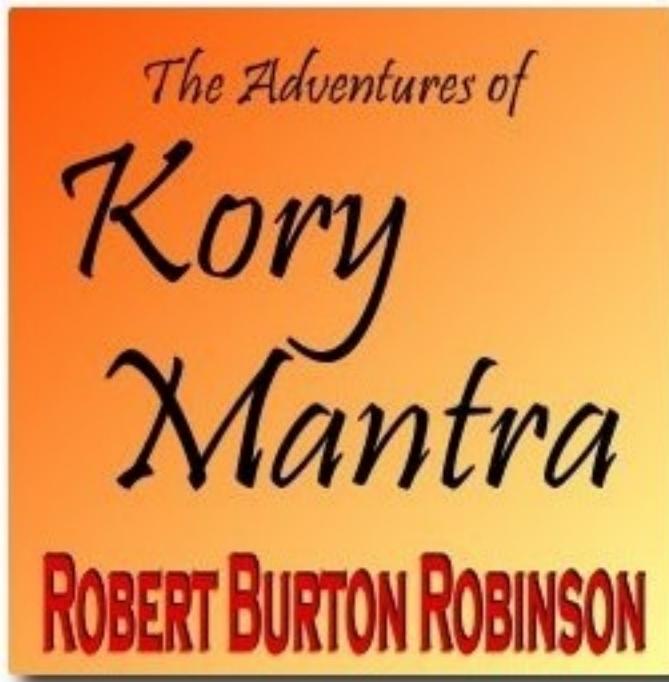
"Okay, Ken and Barbie," said Zeela, "you can get up now."

But Obadiah didn't want to get up. As he gazed into her eyes, he could tell she wanted another kiss. So he eased in until he made contact with her warm, moist lips.

And for the first time in a long time, Obadiah knew he had a future worth living for.

THE END

KORY MANTRA



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GENRE: Adventure/Suspense. LENGTH: 6,136 words. SYNOPSIS: Kory Mantra is a 32-year old computer programmer who, after losing his job and his girlfriend, went on a diet and took up yoga. And to help him stick with it, he made weekly videos of his progress and posted them online.

By the time he reached his goal of losing 90 pounds, over a million people were watching his videos, cheering him on. Then a publishing company offered him a contract for a series of yoga books and DVDs.

So, now he's a celebrity. But will he ever find true love? Or will he die trying?

* * * * *

Kory couldn't help but notice the attractive young woman sitting a few feet away, at the table in the corner. He didn't see a wedding ring. She was dressed as though she was meeting for a first date, he thought. Maybe a blind date.

Kory dipped another tortilla chip in the salsa and put the whole thing in his mouth. He tried not to stare, but his eyes kept wandering back to her.

A stout young guy in jeans walked to the woman's table. He was average height, but double-wide, with bulging muscles. The man's swagger seemed to be based on the belief that every woman in the room was salivating at the sight of his rock-hard biceps and pecs. His skin-tight T-shirt was the correct size for a five-year-old boy. Kory imagined it ripping apart at any moment, flying across the restaurant, and landing on somebody's plate of refried beans.

Kory figured it must be the boyfriend. Not what he had expected.

"Looks like I'm just in time for dinner," said the man, as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I want you to leave—right now," she said sternly, without raising her voice.

"Oh, come on, Baby, you know you don't really mean that."

"I told you I didn't want to see you again, and I meant it. So, either *you* leave, or *I'm* leaving."

"I'm not going anywhere, Honey, and neither are you."

The woman tried to get up, but he grabbed her arm and held it down against the table.

"Let go, Evan."

"No. You're gonna have dinner with me." He continued to hold her arm.

"Let go of her," said Kory.

He looked up to see the slim, but buff, six-foot-four stranger towering over him.

Evan's eyes were cold and mean. Kory nearly flinched. For a second, he thought the big hulk might jump up and rip his head off.

Evan released the woman's arm, and slowly stood up. "I'll call you later, Bella."

She looked as though she would have spit in his face if he had been closer. "Don't bother."

He walked off, winking at a sexy blonde on the way out.

Bella's demeanor abruptly changed. She looked up at Kory with warm eyes. They were exactly the same dark brown shade as her thick and lustrous, shoulder-length hair. "Thank you so much."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay. Good." He smiled. "Have a nice evening." He started to walk away.

"Wait. Why don't you join me for dinner?"

"Well, I—"

"—oh, how stupid of me. You're here with a date." She scanned the room, looking for an attractive woman who was sitting alone, watching them.

"No, it's not that. I just don't want to intrude."

"You're not."

"I mean, I didn't run that guy off just so *I* could—"

"—do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"A wife?"

"No, but—"

"—just sit down." She reached out and took his hand. "Please."

Her grip was firm. Her skin was warm and soft. "Thanks. I hate dining alone." He sat down across from her.

"Me too."

"So, your name is Bella?"

"That's right. Bella Cudry." She extended her hand. "And you are?"

He shook her hand. "Kory. Kory Mantra."

"Wait. *The Kory Mantra*? The guy who made all those videos about losing weight doing yoga?"

"Yep. That's me." He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. "But hold your voice down. If people realize I'm here they might come over and start bugging me for autographs."

"Wow, that's cool. I watched some of your videos on YouTube. How much did you finally lose?"

"Ninety pounds. I started at 275, and lost down to 185."

"Just by doing yoga?"

"No. I also rode a stationary bike, and cut my calories, of course. But without the yoga, I couldn't have stayed focused. And I would have ended up with a lot of flab hanging off my bones."

"Well, you sure don't have any flab. Your body looks lean and sculpted."

Kory looked down at his clothes, as though he wondered if they had just become invisible.

"I mean, I saw how great you looked in one of your later videos," she said.

A waitress came to take their order. They decided on the Chicken Fajitas for Two. Then a young man delivered a fresh basket of warm tortilla chips and two small bowls of salsa.

"So, now you're a yoga guru," said Bella.

"No, I'm not a guru. I'm just a guy who was desperate to get into shape. I went out and bought a bunch of yoga books and got serious. And now I have my own book."

"And I'll bet it's selling like crazy."

"Yeah, it's doing pretty well. But I only wrote about twenty percent of what's in there. The publisher hired other people to write the rest of it."

"Well, that doesn't seem very honest—to put your name on the book, when you really only wrote a small part of it."

"I know. I have mixed feelings about it. But haven't you ever heard of ghost writers? Publishers do this all the time with celebrities. And they told me that my name would sell millions of books, which would lead to millions of people getting healthier and happier."

"They conned you."

"Yeah, sort of. But I knew there was some truth to what they were saying. And, hey, I was out of work. I needed the money."

"What kind of work did you do?"

"Computer programming. But the small company I was working for in The Woodlands went out of business about a year ago. My girlfriend worked there too. So, we both lost our jobs at the same time."

"I thought you said you didn't have a girlfriend."

"I don't anymore. She took a job in Austin and moved out of the house while I was on an interview. I came home and she was gone, along with all her stuff. The only thing she left was a very short goodbye note."

"That's cold."

"Yeah. We had been together for almost a year. So, it was tough for a while. But I'm over her now."

Bella seriously doubted Kory was over his ex, but nodded in agreement anyway. Why do men always think they can get over a relationship so fast? Women know better, she thought.

"So, I've met a few women online. And some of them sound nice."

"Do they know who you are? I mean, do they know you're rich and famous?"

"Oh, I'm not rich. I'm comfortable. But no, I don't talk much about money. I'm hoping they don't know about the yoga guy from YouTube."

"Yeah, because they might just be interested in your money."

"I know."

"Or your good looks." She smiled broadly.

His face reddened. He wasn't so sure about *his* looks. But *she* was amazing—especially when she smiled like that.

"Sorry—I didn't mean to embarrass you. But it's nice to see you haven't let the fame go to your head," she said. I've thought about trying online dating, but I'm just not ready. I've spent the past two years caring for my grandmother full-time. I lived at home with my mom and grandmother while I was in college. But during my senior year, Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Shortly after graduation, she died."

"I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, she hadn't had a mammogram for a couple of years. She stayed so busy taking care of Grandma that she didn't take good care of herself. I felt guilty that I hadn't made sure she was getting regular checkups."

"How's your grandmother doing?"

"She died about a month ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, at least she lived a long, good life," said Bella.

"You must have really loved her. Most women would have put their grandmother in a nursing home. They wouldn't have given up two years of their life the way you did."

"Well, she had been suffering with heart disease for years. And I really didn't think she'd hang on for more than another six months. But then she started feeling a lot better. And we were having fun together. We developed little rituals, like certain TV shows we'd always watch, certain meals we'd eat on particular days.

And every Saturday night we'd get all dressed up and come here for dinner. This was her favorite restaurant."

"So, that's why you're here on Saturday night by yourself?"

"Yeah. This is the first time I've ever come here without her. I thought it would bring back good memories. But it's just making me sad."

"So, what are you going to do with your life, now that she's gone?"

"Get a job. My degree is in criminal justice because I thought I wanted to be a cop. My brother was killed in a convenience store robbery when I was sixteen. It made me so mad—I just wanted to hunt down all the creeps and—"

"—blow them away?"

"Yeah. But I was a kid. I thought I could fix anything that was wrong with the world. Now I know it's not that easy. My mom and grandmother left me the house and some money, so I'm doing okay. But I can't just sit around every day doing nothing. Now that Grandma's gone, my life is empty."

"Well, you've got Evan." Kory grinned, hoping she knew he was joking.

"Yeah. I wish I'd never met him. I had a leaky pipe in the kitchen. But I didn't know any plumbers. So I just randomly picked one out of the yellow pages. I wish now I had fixed it myself. He kept flirting with me. And he was quite charming when he asked me for a date. I told him I wasn't ready to start dating again. But he begged me to have just one dinner with him."

"How did that go?"

"Fine, actually—until he took me home. He asked to come in for a while, and when I told him 'No,' he forced his way in."

"You're kidding."

"No. But a hard kick in the shin and a few screams made him change his mind. He called the next day and apolo-gized. But then he asked me to go to a movie, and I said, 'No, thanks.' And ever since, he's been following me around and showing up at my door several times a week. He's driving me nuts."

"Sounds like you need a restraining order."

"I'm trying not to do that. But I might not have any choice."

When they finished dinner, Kory paid the tab, and walked Bella to her car.

"Hey, we parked right next to each other," said Kory.

"So, this is yours?" said Bella, pointing to the shiny black car.

"Yeah, I know—it's old."

"No. It's a classic. It's a '66 GTO, right?"

"I'm impressed."

"I know cars—especially the cool-looking classics."

Then, go for a ride with me, thought Kory. No—that sounds like a date. "Here's my number." He handed her a business card. "Call me anytime. And please let me know if you need any help with Evan."

Bella smiled and held out her hand. "Thanks, Kory. And thanks for dinner. I really enjoyed it."

I guess this means she wants a handshake, he thought, rather than the kiss he was dying to give her. "Me too."

She got into her car and drove away.

* * * * *

Bella's house was located on a corner, so the back yard could be seen from the street. But the last thing on Evan's mind was whether anybody could see him. He had waited long enough. Tonight he was going to get what he wanted.

He could barely see her through the narrow gap alongside the window shade. Her skin was creamy white. When she took off her dress, he noticed that she had no tan lines whatsoever. Come on, he thought, take it *all* off!

She stepped into a pair of jeans and pulled a sweatshirt over her head.

Enough watching. He was ready to go in.

He decided that the sliding glass door off the living room would offer the least resistance. There was no

rod securing the door in its closed position—just the flimsy, built-in locking mechanism. He took out his four-inch pocket knife, flipped out the blade, and began to pry at the door. He knew he had to hurry. She might walk into the living room at any moment.

"Get away from that door!" the man's voice shouted from behind him.

He whipped around with the knife, ready to slice whoever it was. But when he saw Kory standing there, he relaxed. "Well, if it isn't Mr. Tough Guy from the restaurant."

"I'm calling the police," said Kory, taking out his cell phone.

Evan threw a fast, hard kick.

Kory hopped back, evading what would have been a groin-crushing blow. But Evan's boot connected with Kory's right hand. The cell phone went airborne, flying halfway to the back fence, landing somewhere in the darkness.

"Go ahead—call the police, Buttface," he said with an evil grin, as he held up the knife. The entire thing was black—even the blade. "Ever seen one of these Bad Boys? It's got a super-sharp, Teflon-coated blade. So, when I stab you, it's gonna slide in so nice and easy that you'll barely even feel it."

"Look, Man, just walk away right now, and we'll forget this ever happened."

"Okay, fine." For a moment, Evan acted like he was about to leave. But then he ran at Kory with the knife.

Kory was not nearly as strong as Evan, but he was faster. He jumped to the right, barely missing the knife, and kicked the side of Evan's left knee as hard as he could.

Evan fell to the ground in agony, clutching his knee. But he quickly got back up to confront Kory again. He had dropped the knife and couldn't find it in the dark grass. Now the all-black weapon didn't seem so cool after all.

He lunged at Kory and knocked him down. Then he climbed on top of him, and sat on his stomach. All the strength Kory had developed through his yoga routine could not compensate for his attacker's sixty-pound advantage. Kory's spine and arms were jammed down against the concrete patio. Their heads were two feet away from the sliding glass door.

"Wonder what would happen if I punched your head into the concrete a few times?" Evan laughed. He made a fist and slowly cocked his arm for the first punch.

It surprised both of them when the sliding glass door suddenly opened.

Evan looked up just in time to see Bella throwing a bucket of water at his face. Silly woman, he thought. Did she really expect to hurt him with a little water?

He looked straight at her, grinning, as the liquid rolled off his face. Then he laughed at her—until his eyes began to burn. "What is this? Acid? I'll kill you!" He held Kory's arms down with his knees, and began to rub his eyes—which only made the burning more intense.

Miraculously, none of the Pine-Sol and water solution had splashed into Kory's eyes. He strained his neck to look back at Bella, and saw that she no longer had the bucket in her hands. Now she was holding a mop—by the wrong end.

She swung the mop handle at Evan, as though she was a big league slugger. Bella was gonna knock his head right out of the park. The wood handle cracked when it made contact, and Evan collapsed on top of Kory.

Kory rolled Evan's body off to the side, and stood up. "Thanks. He tried to stab me. His knife is out there in the grass somewhere."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He studied Evan. "We need to call the police. But first, we'd better tie him up. Got any rope?"

"I've got something better than rope." She hurried into the kitchen, got something out of a drawer, and came back. "These will hold him." She held up two pairs of handcuffs.

Kory was a little surprised. But then he remembered she had wanted to be a cop. "One for his hands and one for his feet?"

"No. The second pair is to hook him to the fence."

"Good idea."

They cuffed his hands behind his back, and then dragged his body to the nearby chain link fence that faced the side street.

Bella secured him to the fence with the second pair of cuffs. "He's not going anywhere."

"I don't know. I think he could pull this whole fence loose." Kory reached into his pocket for his cell phone. "I'll call 9-1-1. Oh, I forgot—he kicked my cell phone out of my hand." He walked back over to where they had fought and got down on all fours to search for it. "There you are. Ouch! I found the knife."

"Did you cut yourself?"

"It's just a nick, I think."

"I'll call from the house phone. And I'll get you a Band-Aid."

"And how about a flashlight?"

"Sure."

Kory closed the knife and put it in his pocket. Then he resumed the search for his phone.

Bella called 9-1-1. Then she walked to the bathroom to get a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a bandage. She heard tires screeching, but just figured it was the teenager who lived across the street.

She grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen and walked out to the back yard. There was Evan, still unconscious, sitting against the fence.

"Kory?" She turned on the flashlight and shined it around the yard.

He was gone.

Then she heard a car engine start. She turned, and saw Kory's GTO speeding away. That's weird, she thought.

She couldn't understand why Kory had taken off. She had really liked him. Perhaps after spending every day and night with her grandmother for two years she had lost her knack for reading people. Maybe Kory was not a nice guy after all.

Bella stepped on something. She turned the flashlight toward the ground. It was Kory's cell phone. She picked it up and put it in her pocket.

Then she noticed that Evan looked different. His head was resting awkwardly on his chest, and his tongue was hanging out. She leaned in to see if she could hear him breathing. Then she pressed two fingers to the side of his neck, and felt...nothing.

* * * * *

Kory was driving way over the speed limit. He was too pumped up to worry about the cops.

The house was a few miles north of Bella's place, on a country road. The nearest neighbor was at least a hundred yards away. When he saw the red pickup turn into the long driveway, Kory cut his headlights. The road completely disappeared for a couple of seconds, until his eyes adjusted. But there was little moonlight. He just hoped he could negotiate the right turn into the driveway without going off into the deep ditch. And in the meantime—what if a deer ran out in front of his car?

He slowed down, straining to see the driveway, and carefully turned in. He could have just driven by, located a pay phone, and called the police. That would have been the safe thing to do. But what if this was the wrong guy? How could he be sure he hadn't lost him in traffic? He had seen three or four red pickup trucks along the way.

The man driving the truck had already gone into the house. Kory got out of his car. He would sneak up and look through a window, and hopefully be able to determine if he had the right guy. Then he would go find a pay phone and—

"—hold it right there!" shouted a big, deep voice.

A powerful beam of light blinded Kory. He froze.

"You're trespassing!"

"Uh, I'm sorry. I guess I've got the wrong house. I was looking for John Smith," said Kory, grimacing slightly at the thought of his stupidity. Couldn't he have come up with a better fake name?

The flashlight got closer and closer, until it was six inches from Kory's eyes. Hot, rancid breath blew spittle into his face as the man spoke. "You know what I've always wanted to do?"

Kory was about to say ‘What?’ when he heard a metallic click in his left ear. Then he felt the hard, cool muzzle against his temple.

“I’ve always wanted to take a big pistol, and put it up to a man’s head, and squeeze the trigger—just to watch his brains blow out the other side,” he said, laughing. “Don’t that sound like fun?”

“But wouldn’t your neighbor hear the shot? Wouldn’t he call the police?”

“Nope. Not unless he’s still up—which is doubtful. And even then, his hearing aid would have to be cranked up all the way. But don’t get your panties in a wad, Boy. Daddy wouldn’t be too happy if I killed you just for sport. He likes to do the killing himself. But I *could* tell him you made a run for it—and that’s why I shot you in the back. Wanna make a run for it, Boy?”

“Uh...”

The man chuckled. “Let’s go.” He pulled the gun away from Kory’s head and jammed it into his back. He held it there all the way to the house.

The red pickup was a big Dodge Ram Diesel, with dual rear wheels. About a \$50,000 vehicle, thought Kory. Parked in front of the truck were a brand new, dark blue Mustang, and a black Harley. These are not poor people, he thought.

They walked across the wooden porch, and the man keyed in the security code and opened the front door.

The music of Steppenwolf was so loud it nearly blasted them back out the door. An old hippie-looking man with a beard, wearing a blue jean jacket, was standing in the middle of the room playing air guitar screaming, “Born to be wild!” He caught a glimpse of the two men out of the corner of his eye, grabbed the remote off the coffee table, and muted the sound system. “Who’s this, Bobby?”

Kory finally got a good look at his captor. Bobby had a long strand of beef jerky hanging out of his mouth. No wonder his breath stinks, thought Kory.

Another man came rushing into the room from the side hallway. “I’ll tell you who he is. He’s the guy who attacked Evan tonight. Too bad Evan had to die. But he went and did something stupid, and was about to get himself arrested. So, I had to take him out, and save the merchandise.”

That must have been what he took out of Evan’s truck, thought Kory.

“Yeah, you done good, Son,” said the old man. He turned to Kory. “Billy is quite the marksman.”

Billy picked up a long, black object that was leaning against the wall by the fireplace. “These babies are high-tech. They make them out of aircraft aluminum tubing. I can hit the bulls-eye at 250 feet.”

Kory had never seen a modern blowgun.

“The dart comes out at 350 feet per second,” said Billy. “I use a special poison from South America. At first it just makes your body go all numb. Then your heart stops.”

“Yeah,” said Bobby, “it’s fun to sit on the back porch and watch Billy pick off stray dogs.”

“You know what? I’ll just *show* him how it works,” said Billy, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a thin metal case.

“Put them away, Billy,” said the old man.

Billy ignored him. “And just to make it fair, I’ll give him a good running start.”

“I said ‘No!’” The old man backhanded Billy, nearly knocking him down. “Put that thing away!”

That was close, thought Kory. But he feared his life expec-tancy was less than thirty minutes.

“Bobby, go out in the garage and get a couple of them tie-wraps,” said the old man.

When Bobby came back with them, the old man said, “Now, tie his hands behind his back, and then tie his ankles together.”

Kory had seen these heavy-duty tie-wraps being used on cop shows. It took a sharp knife or a pair of wire cutters to get the things off.

Bobby put a tie-wrap around Kory’s wrists, fed the tip through the self-locking end, and pulled it tight—nearly cutting off the circulation. Then he sat him in a wooden chair and put the other tie-wrap on his ankles.

Kory figured that if all three men were to leave the room for a couple of minutes, he might be able to hop to the door before they could catch him. But even if he somehow made it out of the house, Billy would surely

nail him in the back with a poison dart. He had seriously miscalculated the danger of the situation. Why hadn't he just driven by the house and called the police?

The old man slowly paced back and forth in front of his uninvited guest. "I need some information. And you," he said, reaching into his pants pocket, "are going to give it to me." He pushed a button on the knife and the blade popped out, ready for action.

Kory still had Evan's knife in his pants pocket. Nobody had bothered to pat him down. But with his hands tied behind his back, what good would it do him? "Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Billy tells me that Evan had been dating a woman named Bella, and that you had dinner with her tonight."

Kory looked at Billy. He didn't remember his face from the restaurant. Maybe he was watching from the bar. "Yes, that's right. I did have dinner with Bella. But I just met her for the first time tonight. I don't really know her."

"Then why did you follow her home?"

"I wasn't following *her*—I was following *Evan*. I saw him drive out of the parking lot as she was leaving. I suspected he was going to follow her home. Turns out, I was right."

"What did she tell you about Evan?"

"Just that she went out with him one time, and when he asked her out again, she said 'No.' After that, he started stalking her."

"What did she tell you he did for a living?"

"She said he was a plumber."

"She didn't say anything about drugs?"

"No. Not at all."

"Good."

"You don't believe him, do you Daddy?" said Bobby.

"Yes, I do. He's got an honest face. And I always trust my instincts," said the old man, as he casually walked around behind Kory's chair.

Kory suspected that the old man was about to cut his throat. If he hadn't met Bella tonight, he wouldn't be about to die. But at least he had saved her from Evan. And now she would be okay. Have a wonderful life, Bella, he thought. He wished he could have gotten to know her much better.

A loud siren started blaring, in front of the house. The old man and his two sons ran to the front windows.

"It's my truck alarm," said Billy, taking out his keys. He clicked the remote several times. "It won't turn off."

"Well, go out there and shut it down before some cop happens to drive by," said the old man.

But no sooner than Billy had opened the front door and taken a few steps, he ran back into the house. He nodded at Kory. "His car rammed into the back of my truck."

All three men glared at Kory, as though he had summoned his car, ala *Knight Rider*. Then they ran outside and frantically worked at silencing the alarm.

A voice from behind Kory said, "Let's go!"

Kory turned his head and saw Bella. He showed her the tie-wraps. "There's a knife in my right pants' pocket."

She took it out, opened it, and cut the tie-wrap off his ankles. Then she cut the one off his wrists.

Billy's truck alarm went silent.

Kory and Bella heard somebody's boots walking across the wooden front porch as they hurried out the back hallway.

"Daddy!" yelled Bobby. "He's gone!"

The old man and Billy ran into the house.

"Catch him!" said the old man. "If he gets away, we're dead!"

"I'll get him," said Billy. He picked up his blowgun and ran down the hallway, through the utility room,

and out to the back porch. He could barely see the figure running across the grass toward the neighbor's house. He quickly loaded his weapon, aimed, and blew. Kory would fall to his knees, and then drop dead—just like the mangy old dogs he used for target practice.

"Why is he still running?" said the old man. "He's still running!"

"Hey, I see two people," said Bobby.

Billy blew another dart.

"I think you missed again," said Bobby.

"Why'd you go off and leave him alone in the house, Bobby?" shouted Billy. "This is *your* fault!"

"Uh-oh," said Bobby. "Look!" He pointed toward the road. Three sets of flashing red and blue lights were racing up the road. "They're coming here!"

Billy dropped the blowgun, and ran off the porch and around to the front yard. Bobby and the old man were close behind him.

Billy jumped into his truck.

Bobby got into the Mustang.

The old man jumped on his Harley and stomped the starter.

Just as the police were pulling up to the house, Billy drove diagonally across the front yard, through the ditch and onto the road, nearly colliding with two police cars that were just arriving.

Bobby and the old man drove out the other direction. But the cops quickly cut them off.

Bobby surrendered.

The old man tried to make a sharp U-turn, and slid down.

Kory and Bella watched the circus from the neighbor's driveway.

"How did you find me?" said Kory.

"There was a piece of paper in Evan's shirt pocket. It had the directions on it."

"He must have been planning to come here tonight to sell the drugs."

"Evan was a drug dealer? I can't believe I went out with a drug dealer."

"So, you just took a chance that this is where I went."

"Yeah. After I found the dart stuck in Evan's back, I figured *you* hadn't killed him."

"So, at first you thought *I* had killed him?"

"Well, what was I supposed to think? I go into the house for two minutes, and when I come out, Evan's dead and you're speeding away in your car. But when I saw the dart, I figured that maybe you had gone after the killer. So, I followed the directions. It was the only clue I had."

"I'm glad you did."

"And when I got here I saw your car in the driveway. So, I parked over here and ran up to their house. I peeked in the window and saw that you were in trouble. I figured if I could distract them for a minute, you just might be able to escape. Fortunately, your keys were in the ignition, so I called 9-1-1 and gave them directions. I told them to look for a black '66 GTO. Then I started up your car, dropped it into 'Drive,' and just let it go up the driveway. I knew it would pick up speed as it went along. Then I ran as fast as I could, and went around to the back of the house, and came in just as the truck alarm tripped."

"But how could you be sure his alarm would be turned on?"

"Actually, I didn't even think about the possibility of a car alarm. I figured the crash would be enough to get them out of the house."

He looked at his wrecked GTO in the distance and wondered if it would ever be the same.

"And by the way," she said, "the police are not going to be too happy with us for leaving the scene."

"What do you mean? We're still here."

"I'm talking about the scene at *my* house—Evan's body."

"I think they'll forgive us. We've just handed them three drug dealers." Kory suddenly remembered Billy and his blowgun. "Did you hear something when we were running?"

"Like what?"

"Like a dart flying through the air."

"No, but you were behind me. Turn around and let me check you."

Kory turned his back to her.

"I need more light. Come over to my car," she said, leading him to the truck. She popped the lid, and the light came on inside. Almost immediately, the bulb burned out.

"Great," he said. "But I guess if he'd hit one of us, we'd already be dead."

She took hold of his shoulders to direct him. "Turn this way just a little. There."

The moonlight was dim, but his pants were white, and looked almost glow-in-the-dark. "Hold still." She put her left hand against his right butt cheek.

He didn't have any idea what she was doing, but he kinda liked it. He felt her pull something off the seat of his pants. "What are you doing?"

"Getting this." She held up a dart.

He turned back around. His face went pale when he saw it. "I didn't even feel it." He began to hyperventilate. "I must be going numb—just like Billy said I would!"

She dropped the dart in the trunk. "Relax. You're gonna be fine. Take off your pants."

"What?"

"You heard me. Take them off—carefully."

He slipped out of his shoes. Then he took his pants off, and held them out, by the waistband.

She took them, turned them around, and pointed to the right rear pocket. "Your wallet saved you. You're gonna need a new one." She dropped the pants into the trunk.

Without thinking, he grasped her head with both hands and kissed her on the mouth. He pulled away from her lips sooner than he really wanted to. "Thank you for saving my life, Bella."

She stepped back. "I was just returning the favor."

"Oh, I don't think Evan planned to *kill* you."

"No. But if he'd had his way with me, I would have *wished* I was dead."

"Hey, I'd better check you for darts."

"No. I was running in front of you. He couldn't have hit me. Besides, like you said, I'd already be dead."

"Turn around."

"Oh, alright." She turned her back to him.

"Let's see." He worked his hands carefully down her back and across her firm rear end and thighs.

"Hey." She spun around.

"Looks like you're dart-free."

"Do that again, and you're gonna be *hands-free*." She punched him hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. Once he had caught his breath, he said, "Bella?"

"Yes?"

"You said you wanted to get a job. Why don't you come to work for me?"

"Doing what?"

"You could be my personal assistant—taking phone calls, answering emails, stuff like that."

"Sounds like a secretarial job to me. No, thanks."

"Look, Bella, I need somebody I can trust. Not some nine-to-fiver who'll go telling everybody my business. I want somebody who's smart, tough, and discrete."

"Somebody to come to the rescue when you get your butt in a bind?"

"I don't usually get into *this* much trouble."

"Well, I don't know. Maybe if I could take it on a trial basis, and just see how it goes...."

"Sure."

"But no more kissing or grabbing. That's not part of the deal." She punched him hard in the arm.

"Ouch! You got me right on the bone."

"Good."

"So, you want to start on Monday?"

"Yeah, okay. And my first order of business will be to make you go out and buy some new boxers. Those things are ugly—even in the dark."

Kory rubbed his arm. "I must be crazy. You're gonna be a pain in the rear."

"But I'll keep you on track."

"That's what I need."

They watched the police handcuff the three felons and stuff them into the back seats of their cruisers.

Kory moved in close to Bella's side and put his arm around her shoulders.

"Careful," she warned, smiling to herself.

THE END

LAYOFF RUMORS



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GENRE: Humor. LENGTH: 636 words. SYNOPSIS: And you thought your job sucked.

* * * * *

“Have you heard?” said Lance.

“What?” said Mary.

“There’s a new owner.”

“So?” said Tony.

“Are you kidding me?” said Lance. “Don’t you know what that means?”

“No. I just started here.”

“It’s not good,” said Mary.

“Why?” said Tony. “What’s the big deal who the owner is? It’s still the same job, right?”

“Wrong. New owners usually like to clean house—start fresh,” said Lance.

Tony had a blank look on his face.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you, Tony?”

“No, I guess not.” Tony did not appreciate Lance making him look like an idiot in front of Mary. He really liked her. In fact, if the circumstances had been different he would have asked her out. Too bad coworkers could not date.

“Yeah,” said Lance, “we’ve weathered a lot of storms around here, and most of us managed to hang on. But this is different. We’ve got a new owner.”

“But this is my first day,” said Tony. “That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Fair? You think he gives a flip about what’s fair?” said Lance. “You’re just a number to him. That’s all.”

Tony wasn’t convinced.

“I’m afraid he’s right,” said Mary.

Lance continued, "I'm telling you, Man, you'll be out of here so fast—you won't even know what hit you."

"That's depressing," said Tony, as it began to sink in. "But why doesn't he just get rid of the old timers—like *that* guy. He looks like he's been here forever."

"Bob? Yeah, Bob's been here longer than most of us have been alive. I don't know what his secret is, but somehow he's managed to stick around. But look at him. This place has just sucked the life out of him."

"Well, this just makes me sick," said Tony. "I really thought I was getting somewhere when I landed this job. And now—to find out it's a dead end..."

"Just accept it," said Mary. "Don't fight it. You're just making yourself miserable."

"I can't help it," said Tony.

"Breathe deeply," said Mary. "Release the stress. That's what I do. It's not about your situation. It's about how you deal with it."

"Hey, I don't go for that new age stuff," said Lance, "but to each his own. Whatever gets you through the night. Whatever floats your boat. Whatever—"

"—stop!" said Tony. "Enough with the clichés!"

Suddenly everybody got quiet. Something was beginning to rumble. It was getting louder by the second.

"What's that?" said Tony, looking around. "Is it like one of those storms you've lived through?"

"Nope. *That* is the sound of your pink slip," said Lance.

"But I thought—"

"—you thought what?" said Lance. "That you could just walk away from this thing? That you wouldn't be affected like the rest of us? What makes you so special anyway?"

"But it's just a job." His voice began to quiver. "What is that loud noise and why is it getting so dark?"

"This is it," said Mary.

"We're dead meat," said Lance.

Tony shouted over the roaring sound. "But I thought the new owner would just let us all go. And then we could go out and get new jobs."

"You fool!" yelled Lance.

"This can't be," said Tony. "How can he just *kill* us?"

Before Lance could answer, he and his coworkers were bombarded by a thunderous tidal wave—sending their frail bodies airborne for a moment before they crashed to the ground.

Their jobs were down the drain—and so were they.

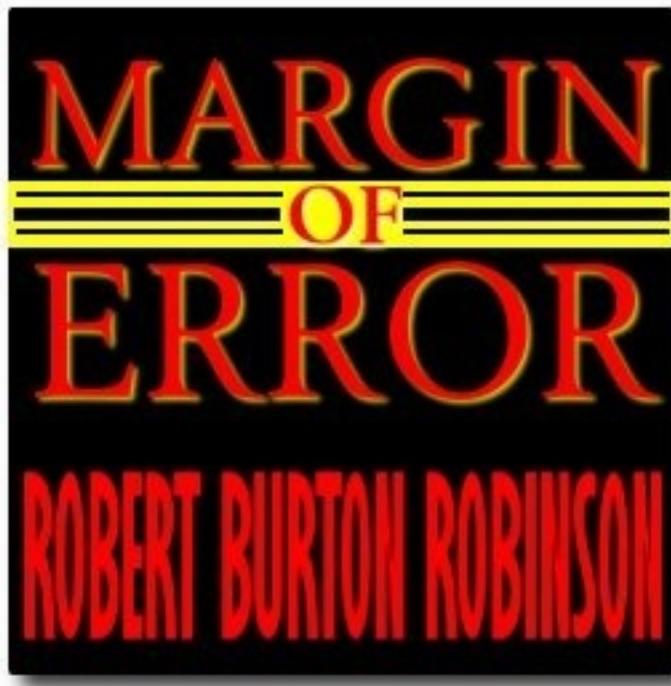
Poor old Bob still clung to the hood ornament. The new owner would have to scrape him off by hand.

A new crop of employees were waiting in the wings. They would begin to come onboard soon—unaware of their certain fate.

And you thought *your* job sucked.

THE END

MARGIN OF ERROR



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GENRE: Suspense/Crime. LENGTH: 2,863 words. SYNOPSIS: An ambitious campaign manager claims she can deliver a victory every time—once she gets the poll numbers within the Margin of Error. But she learns too late that not everything in life works like an election. And that statistics can only be carried so far...before you become one.

* * * * *

“Have a seat, Lucinda.”

“Thank you, Sir—I mean Mayor.”

The mayor smiled. “I do like the sound of that. But I couldn’t have done it without you.”

And I’m glad you’re smart enough to realize it, thought Lucinda. “Oh, I don’t know about *that*, Mayor.”

“No, no. Don’t be modest. I hired you to pull a rabbit out of your hat, and you did it. It was impressive. When you came in, I was down twenty points, and—”

“—twenty-three.”

“And somehow you turned public opinion around. Nobody thought I could beat Elderman—until my poll numbers started getting better every week.”

“Once we tied him, I knew he was gonner.”

“You kept saying that. But we never *did* tie him. He was still four points ahead in the last poll.”

“Right. We were within the *margin of error*.”

“Oh, you and your margin of error. I’ve heard that every day for the last month. Margin of error *this*, margin of error *that*.”

“Hey—you won, didn’t you?”

The mayor grinned. “I sure did. And now you’re gonna be my chief of staff. Right?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

"No, you're not. You want the job."

"It depends." Lucinda smiled seductively. "Do you have any dinner plans?"

"Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Sorry." He checked his watch. "Well, thanks again, Lucinda. Wonderful job. Now, why don't you walk down the hall to your new office and get to work."

She frowned at him.

"It's the biggest office in the building."

"Besides this one."

"Well, yes, of course."

Lucinda stood up.

The mayor got up and walked around to the front of his desk. "Oh, and our first order of business: the homeless."

"I know. *Job One: Clean Up the Streets.*"

He smiled. "It was a great slogan."

"Thank you."

"Your idea of doing our own private polling was *genius*. I knew people were upset about all the homeless guys hanging around restaurants, begging for handouts. But I had no idea it was the number one concern."

"Yeah. Elderman probably thought we were nuts to go with that campaign slogan."

"And by the time he realized we were on to something, it was too late." He laughed. "It was brilliant."

If you really want to show your appreciation, thought Lucinda, how about a hot, wet kiss?

"And now it's *your Job One*, Lucinda. Go clean up the streets." He walked her to the door.

"I'm going to need some money."

"No problem."

"Don't you want to know how—"

"—I don't care how you do it or how much it costs. Just get it done."

* * * * *

The mayor had avoided Lucinda for two weeks. He was always too busy to meet with her. She guessed it was because of her romantic interest in him.

"Close the door and have a seat, Lucinda. I want to talk to you about these poll numbers," said the mayor.

Lucinda smiled. "You're looking great, Mayor. The people are very happy with you."

"Except when it comes to the homeless."

"What do you mean? You got a ninety-six percent approval rating on that. And our margin of error was four percent. So, you were perfect."

"No, Lucinda. I don't want to hear anything about a margin of error. I want to see one-hundred percent approval on this thing."

"But, Mayor—"

"—look. You and I both know there are still bums out there on the streets. And all it takes is one or two business owners calling some reporter down at the TV station and they'll do a story on the total failure of my cleanup efforts. I can't have that, Lucinda. Fix it. Now!"

"Yes, Mayor." She stood up. "I'm on it."

She walked down the hall to her office, shut the door, and flipped open her cell phone.

"It's been two weeks, Frank. When are you going be finished? The Mayor's losing patience."

"I'm done."

"I don't *think* so. I saw two men lying on the sidewalk outside Pappy's Pancake House this morning. You're not done."

"Look, almost all of the people took the cash and got on a bus. And believe me, I put the fear of God in them. They won't come back."

"I believe you. But what about the others?"

"I tried everything. But they've got to be able to stand up and walk onto the bus. You can't *carry* them on. They're so messed up—some of them don't even know who they are."

"You can't scare them into going?"

"I told one guy if he didn't get up and come with me I was gonna slit his throat. I even pulled out a knife and held it to his neck. He didn't care. Maybe he *wanted* me to do it—just to put him out of his misery."

"Well, what am I gonna do?"

"That's your problem. I want my cash. Meet me in thirty minutes."

"But..."

She took the phone away from her ear and looked at it. He had already hung up.

* * * * *

"Aren't you going to count it?" said Lucinda.

"I trust you," said Frank, as he put the thick envelope into his coat pocket. "This guy might be able to help you." He handed her a slip of paper with phone number on it.

"Who—"

"—don't ask," he said. "And you didn't get that from me. Good luck." He got up from the booth and walked out of the restaurant.

Lucinda looked around. She checked her wig for the tenth time, making sure it was still securely attached. Nobody would recognize her anyway. The townspeople didn't even know her—except for the mayor and his staff.

She dropped a five-dollar bill on the table for the coffee, and walked out to her car. The phone number on the slip of paper was from another area code.

It would be crazy to hire some anonymous man over the phone. But she was desperate to complete her task. She couldn't give up now. Lucinda would finish the job, and then get what she wanted most: a date with the mayor.

The services she required were in the gray area, legally speaking. *Dark* gray. No matter, she thought. Whatever it takes.

She punched in the numbers and waited.

"Yeah?" It was a deep, gruff voice.

"Uh...somebody gave me your number, and—"

"—who gave you my number?" He sounded even scarier than Frank.

"I can't say. But I may have a job for you."

"What does it pay?"

"Five thousand."

"Call somebody else."

"No, wait. I can go as high as ten."

"What's the job?"

"Getting the homeless people off our streets. We managed to get most of them to leave town by giving them money. But the others—they're just too messed up in the head. You can't reason with them."

"How many people are we talking about?"

"Probably less than a dozen."

"When do you need it done?"

"As soon as possible."

"Tomorrow night. And don't be stupid enough to try to rip me off."

"I wouldn't do that. But I don't even know your name."

"I don't yours either. But I have your phone number. I'll look up the rest."

Suddenly Lucinda felt dangerously exposed.

"And don't bother trying to trace *my* phone. It's a throwaway."

If it was a throwaway, how did Frank have the number? "I won't."

The line went dead.

* * * * *

"Hello?"

"Ten is not enough."

Lucinda jumped up from her desk, hurried to the door and closed it. "That's was the deal."

"You said there were less than a dozen. The number's more like sixteen. I've taken care of eleven. So, I'm done. And I want my money."

"No, that's not good enough. They *all* have to go. It doesn't do me any good unless every one of them is off the street."

"Then you'll pay me an extra ten."

"What? No. I'll pay an extra five. That's all."

"Fine. Then you can get somebody else. But I want my money today."

She couldn't pay him another ten-thousand dollars. But where would she find somebody else to take care of the last few bums? The mayor was giving a speech on Thursday night. He wanted to be able to claim success for cleaning up the streets. She had to get it done.

"Okay. I'll pay the extra ten. But you've got to finish it tonight."

"Done."

* * * * *

Lucinda rolled over and stared at the glowing numbers on her alarm clock. It was after three. She wondered if he had finished the job.

Since she couldn't sleep anyway, she decided to go for a drive. She passed Pappy's. Yes! No more homeless. Then she drove by a few of the other popular homeless hangouts. They were all gone. She couldn't believe it. How had he done it? What difference did it make? They were all gone.

As she drove toward her apartment, Lucinda felt a great sense of satisfaction. Now that the pressure was off, she had a craving for a good cup of coffee and a piece of pie. And she knew just where to get it.

She took a shortcut through the high school parking lot on her way to Bill's 24-Hour Coffee Shop. It hadn't taken long to discover that Bill had the best Apple pie in town.

But as she drove past the high school, she noticed some-thing odd. In the moonlight, above the building there was a cloud of smoke. Perhaps it was just an optical illusion. Yes, she thought, it was probably a cloud way off in the sky.

Lucinda stopped the car and rolled down her window. It was no cloud. She could smell the smoke.

She killed the engine and got out of the car. If some kids were up to no good, she didn't want to alert them to her presence until she could see who they were and what they were doing.

She ran around to the back of the building to take a look. The smoke was coming from the school's incinerator. The gate was open. An old commercial van was parked in front of the incinerator. The engine was running, but the headlights were off.

A man walked around from the back of the van with something across his shoulder. He carried it to the incinerator and dumped it into the open hatch.

Then it hit her. Surely this is not the man I hired, she thought. And surely the thing he just threw into the incinerator was not a...

The man walked to the back of the van, closed the doors, and then went back to the incinerator to close the hatch. He got into the van and drove away with his headlights still off.

Once he was gone, Lucinda hurried over to the incinerator. She found a crumpled paper bag on the ground to use as an oven mitt. When she opened the incinerator hatch, she gasped and jumped back from the searing heat. Then she eased in—just close enough to see down inside.

A set of eyes in a burning face looked back at her. The man must have been so full of drugs or alcohol that he was just waking up to the excruciating pain of the fire engulfing his body. He looked as if he was trying to scream. Perhaps his vocal chords had already burned away. His eyeballs suddenly burst into flames.

Lucinda turned and vomited repeatedly.

When the queasiness began to subside she turned around to close the hatch. Something shiny on the ground caught her eye. She picked it up and studied it in the light of the raging fire. It was a silver necklace with a seven-sided silver charm that had two letters in the center: AA. Undoubtedly, it had belonged to one

of the drunks who were now being cremated. They should have stayed on the program, she thought, as she put the necklace into her pocket.

She closed the hatch and walked back around the building, got into her car and drove away, praying nobody had seen her.

Her craving for pie was gone.

* * * * *

"I didn't see any bums on the streets this morning."

"And you won't from now on, Mayor," said Lucinda.

"Wonderful. Great job."

And now, how about a dinner date, she thought.

"I'd like to bounce something off you, Lucinda. I've been working on my speech for tomorrow night, and there's a spot that's not quite right. But I just don't know how to fix it."

"I'll be happy to help."

The mayor read the passage, and asked her what she thought.

"Well, it sounds pretty good," she said, getting up from her chair and walking around behind his desk. She pointed. "But right here—I would swap these two sentences. And remove this one. It's redundant."

"Yeah—I think you're right. Thanks."

Lucinda had never been on the front side of his desk. "Oh, this is a nice picture. What a fish."

"Yeah, that was a great day."

"Is that your son standing next to you?"

"Yes, that's Andy. That was before he got into drugs and moved out of the house."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Yeah. I blame Aaron. That's him in the picture with us. He and Andy are best friends. And they're a singing duo. They were actually very good—before the drugs."

Lucinda gulped. "What are those necklaces they're wear-ing?"

"They had those made right after they started performing in public. The 'AA' stands for Andy and Aaron. They were great kids—before they got all messed up."

"Is that what led to your divorce?" She quickly added, "I'm sorry. That's none of my business."

"It's okay. Yes, it was a big part of it. Peg thought I was too hard on Andy. I told him he could either give up the drugs or move out."

"So, he chose to move out."

"Yeah."

"Out of town?"

"No. He's still around. I saw him the other day walking down the sidewalk with Aaron. They were completely zoned out though."

No, thought Lucinda, it couldn't be.

"Well, thanks again. There will be a nice bonus in your next paycheck."

"Thanks."

She went to her office, closed the door, grabbed her purse off her desk, and began to riffle through it. She pulled the necklace out and held it up. There was an inscription on the edge of each of the seven sides. The lettering was so tiny that Lucinda had not even noticed it before. She strained her eyes to read each word: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, and Pride.

It was the seven deadly sins. And she had committed them all. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

* * * * *

Lucinda found it tougher than ever to fall asleep. It had been hard enough to live with the guilt of killing hopeless drunks and drug addicts. Now she had the blood of a teenager on her hands. Or maybe two...or more!

Somehow, she finally dozed off.

A couple of hours later she awoke to a sharp pain in her arm. She opened her eyes and saw a man

standing over her. She tried to jump up and run away, but she couldn't even lift her head off the pillow.

The man's face was just beyond the range of the nightlight. She cringed when she saw the empty syringe in his right hand. No wonder she felt so weird and weak. He had drugged her.

He held up his left hand. The necklace dangling from it was the one she had so foolishly left on her nightstand. This man had somehow figured out what she had done.

He threw the empty syringe on the floor and leaned down to her. She could almost make out his face. Then he pulled a necklace out of the top of his shirt and let it hang from his neck. It was exactly like the one in his hand!

"I'm sorry," she said. Her speech was uncontrollably slurry. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for anybody to get hurt."

The man took a syringe out of his pocket.

"Which one are you—Andy or Aaron?"

"I was the last one in the van. Whatever he drugged us with didn't work as well on me. I ran into the woods before he could come walk back to the van and get me. After he drove off, I saw you holding Aaron's necklace. And when I found out you worked for my father, I knew you were the one who had hired that man."

He took the cap off the syringe.

"No. I didn't mean for that to happen." She began to weep. "I'm sorry. Please don't kill me."

He stuck the needle into her arm.

Lucinda had no strength to resist. She felt herself sinking into the bed.

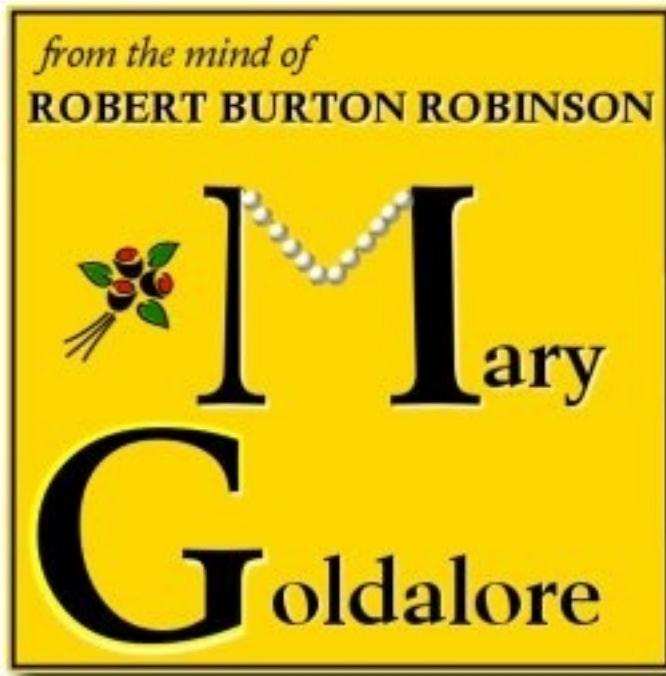
The mayor had gotten what he wanted. The streets were free of homeless people. Maybe he would even get his son back.

Once the police figured out what she had done, it would be easy for them to believe she had committed suicide. How could any decent person live with that kind of guilt?

Lucinda lay helpless as she melted slowly but surely into the narrow sinkhole...of her own MARGIN OF ERROR.

THE END

MARY GOLDALORE



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GENRE: Suspense/Crime. LENGTH: 3,525 words. SYNOPSIS: Mary Goldalore is very attractive, wealthy divorcee in her mid-thirties. She's also a bit naive—making her a prime candidate for a con artist's scheme.

* * * * *

A tall, slender woman in her mid-thirties spotted the two wealthy-looking women about her age at the end of the bar. She picked up her martini, walked over and sat down next to them. "Are you ladies expecting company?"

Mary and Sylvia were overdressed, even for this fancy nightclub.

"I'm afraid not," said Mary." She saw the woman's eyes go to her chest. It was hard to tell whether she was admiring Mary's ample cleavage or the four-thousand dollar cultured pearls draped across it.

"Hi. I'm Dolly Otterman."

"I'm Mary Goldalore." When she held out her hand, Mary's diamond bracelet seemed to catch every light in the room. It was stunning, and she enjoyed showing it off.

"Sylvia Partov."

Sylvia's jewels were also quite impressive.

"I don't believe I've ever seen you two in here before," said Dolly.

"It's my first time," said Mary, sounding like a virgin in every sense of the word.

"Mine too," said Sylvia.

Dolly leaned in. "It's a great place to pick up men."

"Really? I was *hoping* to meet a nice gentleman," said Mary, surveying the room.

"Well, believe me—it's easy. I do it all the time," said Dolly.

Mary noticed the wedding ring. "But you're married."

Dolly shrugged. "Sort of."

"What does that mean?"

"Weekends only."

"I see—one of those *open* marriages."

Sylvia began to squirm.

Dolly finished off her martini. "Did you see that hunk over there?"

"Where?"

"The guy sitting in the booth by himself."

"Okay, yeah, I see him."

"He is super hot. And loaded."

Mary took a second look. "Then why is he alone?"

"He's kinda shy. I went out with him once. Tried to take him to the *rabbit ranch*—if you know what I mean."

"Huh?"

"You know—the horizontal hippie dance."

The bartender overheard, and offered Mary a translation. "She tried to do him."

"Oh," said Mary. This Dolly person was a bit on the raunchy side.

"But he wouldn't go for it," said Dolly. "He told me he was looking for *true* love. How stupid is that? No wonder he's sitting alone. So, I just thanked him for the nice dinner, and that was that."

"Hmm," said Mary.

"But we're still buds. So, you want to meet him?"

"Oh, I don't know if I—"

"—look, you came here to meet a man, right? And this is a nice guy—probably just your type. What do you say? I love playing matchmaker." She looked over at Sylvia. "And then I can hook you up with somebody, Sylvia."

"You know what?" said Sylvia with a nervous smile. "I believe I hear my husband calling me." She grabbed her purse and stood up.

"Okay," said Mary, "I understand."

"See you tomorrow at the club," said Sylvia.

"Okay, bye," said Mary.

"So, Mary? You want to meet him or not?" said Dolly.

"I guess so."

"Yeah, come on." Dolly slid off the bar stool. "His name is Kyle Pickerpan."

Mary followed her to Kyle's booth. She casually checked the faces at each table as she walked by. Who was watching her do this? Anybody she knew? Then she spotted Jennifer, sitting with another woman in the booth adjacent to Kyle's. She was one of Mary's close friends—known to be a voracious gossip. Hopefully she would just mind her own business tonight.

"Hello, Kyle," said Dolly. "How are you this evening?"

He smiled. "I'm fine, Dolly." Up close, he looked younger and even more handsome.

"Well, I'd like to introduce you to my new friend. This is Mary..."

"Goldalore," said Mary.

Kyle slid out of the booth and stood up.

He was about six foot, but his sleek build made him seem even taller.

"And this," said Dolly, "is Kyle Pickerpan—ladies man."

Kyle appeared to be slightly embarrassed. "Glad to meet you, Mary."

"Okay, then," said Dolly. "I'm gonna leave you two love birds alone." She walked off.

"Dolly's a little rough around the edges," said Kyle.

"Yes, I noticed."

"Please join me. He offered Mary a seat at his booth.

"Well, okay—just for a minute." She sat down across from him—well aware that Jennifer was right behind

her, and would hear every word that was said.

"I just moved here to Atlanta a couple of weeks ago. I bought a lovely old home in Tuxedo Park."

Homes in that subdivision appraised for five to ten million dollars.

Kyle went on. "Frankly, the house is too big for me. But I just fell in love with that area. I'm having the house renovated. Right now I'm staying at the Omni."

"That's a nice hotel."

"Yes. But I can't wait to get moved into the house."

"So, it's just you? No family?"

"No. I'm still looking for Miss Right."

"You must be very patient."

"Why do you say that? Because I'm old?"

"No—I'm sorry. That was so rude. Please forgive me."

He smiled. "No problem. Actually, I get that a lot. But so many of the women I meet are just looking to strike it rich. So, I have to be careful."

"I know what you mean."

"So, I assume you're divorced."

"Yes, for two years," said Mary. "But what made you think I was divorced? Couldn't I have been like you—still waiting for Mr. Right?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding me? Look at you. You're just too beautiful to have made it this long without some guy winning you over."

"Thanks...I think."

"Hopefully he didn't marry you for your money."

"No. He had his own money. That wasn't the problem. He just turned out to be a major jerk."

"You were lucky then."

"Lucky?"

"He could have taken half your wealth."

"Well, yes, I suppose I was lucky in *that* sense. But I was miserable for seven years, so I don't feel very lucky."

"How many years were you married?"

"Seven and a half."

He laughed. "Why did you stay in a bad marriage for so long?"

"Because of my mother. I still remember her exact words: *I forbid you to marry him*. Then, at the wedding reception, she pulled me aside and told me I would be divorced within a year. *I had to prove her wrong*."

"Well, sure. I can understand that. But why did you stick it out for all those years? Wouldn't *one* year have proved her wrong?"

"Yes, it *would* have—if she hadn't kept telling me I was being stupid for not divorcing him."

He smiled. "Forgive me for saying so, but you seem to be rather stubborn."

"Only when it comes to my mother."

"So, why did you finally give in and get the divorce?"

"My mother died."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did you two ever settle your differences?"

"Not really. But we *did* love each other. Arguing was just something we liked to do. I never fully realized it until her death, but those were our most fun times together."

"To each his own, I guess."

"Yeah, I know. Weird, huh? I don't usually talk about this—especially on a first—"

"—date?"

"No, I mean—"

"—it's okay. It really does feel like a date. Let's get out of here."

"And go where?"

"Well, we could go to my—never mind. That sounds like I'm trying to get you into bed."

"What? Your hotel room? No, I didn't think that at all. I can see what kind of man you are. You wouldn't try to take advantage of me. But let's go to my house. I've got a huge fireplace. We can relax on the couch and talk. And have a glass of wine."

He smiled as he took her hand. "Sounds great."

She took out her cell phone.

"Charles? I'm ready to go home. And I have a guest...Thanks."

"Charles will be here with the limo by the time we walk out front," said Mary.

"Charles is your chauffeur?"

"Chauffeur and butler. He's been with me for years."

* * * * *

Mary sat with Kyle on the plush leather couch in her den, talking and watching the flames flicker in the fireplace. Charles brought them two glasses and a \$150 bottle of Pinot Noir.

After several glasses, Kyle moved over closer to her. He began to kiss her and she began to melt. But when she felt his fingers fidgeting with her bra strap, she pulled away.

"No, no," she said. "None of that. Remember: you're saving yourself for Miss Right."

"I think I've found her." He leaned in for another kiss.

She held him back. "It's late. Time for bed."

His face lit up.

"Correction: time for sleep."

"Ah, come on, Baby."

"I'll get Charles to drive you to your hotel."

Kyle made Mary agree to out with him for lunch the next day.

* * * * *

Mary had selected an exclusive restaurant downtown.

"So, nice to see you again, Mrs. Goldalore," said the head waiter.

She ordered a chef salad. Kyle had a sirloin steak.

"I love this city," said Kyle.

"So, you plan to stay for a while?" said Mary.

"Definitely."

"Good."

"And I hope to spend a lot of time with you."

"Wonderful."

They had a nice conversation while they ate. Just after their bill had been delivered, the head waiter had dropped by for assurances that the quality of both the food and the service had been superb.

"Mary, maybe I'm way off base," said Kyle, as he looked deep into her eyes, "but I really think we could have something very special together."

She smiled warmly. "I think you may be right."

He picked up her hand and kissed it.

"You know what?" she said.

"What?"

"Let's celebrate."

"Okay. Great," he said.

"Let's go."

He threw two one-hundred dollar bills on the table as though they were worthless scraps of paper.

She took his hand and led him out of the restaurant, down the sidewalk to a jewelry store.

When they walked inside, he said, "So, you're ready for an engagement ring?"

"No, silly."

He looked disappointed.

"Not yet. Maybe in a few weeks," she said playfully.

A salesman already had his eyes and ears focused on them.

"I love jewelry," she said. "Ooh. Look at this ring."

The salesman stepped up, took it out of the glass cabinet and showed it to her. "This would be a lovely addition to your collection, Mrs. Goldalore."

"How much, George?"

Kyle didn't seem at all surprised that the Mary and the jeweler knew each other by name.

"Twenty-five," he said.

She turned to Kyle. "Would like to buy it for me, Kyle?"

Kyle swallowed hard. "Uh, sure."

She lowered her voice. "If you ask me to marry you in a couple of weeks and I say 'Yes,' this can be my engagement ring. But I really want it now."

"No problem," said Kyle, smiling. "Wrap it up for her, George."

George happily did just that.

"Twenty-five hundred, right?" said Kyle, handing George his American Express card.

"No, Sir. It's twenty-five thousand."

"Oh," said Kyle, as his face turned pale.

"Is that okay, Kyle?" said Mary. Then she whispered, "I can cover it—if it's a problem."

Kyle cleared his throat and tried to smile. "No problem."

"Deliver it to your home as usual, Mrs. Goldalore?" said George.

"Yes, thank you," said Mary. She turned to Kyle. "I don't like to walk out of here wearing a brand new piece of expensive jewelry. It's just asking to get mugged. I'll wear it to dinner." She had assumed that a dinner invitation was forthcoming.

Kyle called his driver, and within a few minutes his rented limo pulled up outside the jewelry store. Mary would go home, take a nap, and freshen up for dinner.

* * * * *

At 5:00 p.m. Kyle's limo pulled up in front of Mary's mansion. It was to be a very formal evening.

Kyle walked up the steps with a dozen roses in hand, and rang the doorbell.

A very attractive woman opened the door. She certainly was not a maid. She looked a lot like Mary.

"You must be Mary's sister."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Kyle Pickerpan. Mary and I have dinner plans."

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong address."

"No. I was here this morning with Mary. And last night."

"Mary who?"

"Mary Goldalore," he said.

She stared at him for a moment. "That's impossible—because *I'm* Mary Goldalore."

He hesitated. "Is this some kind of a joke?" He tried to look around her, to see inside. "Mary?"

"Sir, I'm the only Mary in this house."

"Let me talk to Charles, the chauffeur—he'll tell you."

"Okay. You're going to have to leave now or I'm going to call the police."

"It's okay," said a familiar voice from inside the house.

"Mary?" said Kyle.

His Mary joined the other Mary in the doorway.

"What's going on here, Mary?" said Kyle.

"I'm not really Mary Goldalore. She is."

"Then who are you?" said Kyle.

"My name is Janice. You might remember me as a brunette," she said, pulling off the blonde wig.

"I don't know *who* you are," said Kyle, "but I want my ring back."

"You really don't remember me? It was about a year ago in Little Rock. I borrowed some jewelry and a dress from my employer and went to a nightclub. When you're a maid it's hard to get dates with well-to-do men. I figured if a guy thought I was wealthy he would give me a chance. Then he could get to know the real me."

Kyle seemed to recognize Janice, but he didn't say a word.

"And you did give me a chance. But when you took me home that night, you drugged me and stole my borrowed jewelry. The next morning a realtor woke me up. He was showing the house to potential buyers. And it wasn't even your house."

"That wasn't *me*," said Kyle. "You've got me confused with somebody else."

"Gee, then that's quite a coincidence, since *his* name was also Kyle Pickerpan."

The real Mary spoke up. "So, Mr. Pickerpan, shall we call the police to discuss the ring? Or would you just like to call it even?"

He began to step backwards, toward the limo. "You women are crazy. I don't know who this man is that you're talking about, or why he's using my name. But I'm gonna find out." He opened the limo door. "Just keep the stupid ring." He got in and slammed the door. The limo drove away.

The two women began to laugh.

"We got him good, Janice."

"Yes, we did. Thanks for all your help. And it was so nice of your friend, Sylvia, to go with me last night. I don't think I could have pulled it off without her help."

"What about that Dolly woman—you think she was Kyle's partner?"

"Definitely. She was just waiting at the bar, looking for prospects. She might have already talked to several women before we came in. Maybe they were married, or not rich enough. Who knows?"

"And then she saw you and Sylvia walk in—"

"—wearing tons of jewelry. But I would have been too nervous without Sylvia. Dolly would have seen right through me. I'm not much of an actress."

"Oh, but you *are*."

"Well, yeah, I guess I did okay, huh?"

"You totally fooled her and Kyle."

"But I really thought I was in trouble when I saw your friend, Jennifer, sitting in the next booth."

Mary laughed. "Yeah, I'm surprised she didn't say something. But I guess she was too busy listening. She called me this morning to tell me what she'd heard. Of course, she had already spread the story about my maid going around pretending to be me. Now she feels pretty foolish."

"Serves her right."

"Well, I'm just glad you spotted Kyle yesterday morning when you were in town. I'm surprised you recognized him. You were only with him that one night. And that was a year ago."

"Are you kidding, Mary? I'll never forget that face."

"Well, now you've finally got your money back."

"Thanks for writing me the check. Are you sure George will take the ring back?"

"Oh, yes. It's no problem. We've done business for years."

"He was great, by the way."

"He called after you two left. I think he enjoyed being in on it."

"Well, okay then. I've got my car packed, so I'll head out now."

"Please be careful. And let me know how you're doing."

"I will."

"Maybe your mom's health will take a turn for the better. I know it's going to be tough caring for her around the clock."

"Yes. But what else can I do? She's my mother."

The two women hugged and Janice walked out to her car and drove off.

* * * * *

"It was a perfect plan—the best ever," said Janice, who was sitting in the front passenger seat of the Chevy Suburban.

"You were a very believable Mary Goldalore," said Dolly from the back seat.

"I think all three of us deserve Oscars," said Kyle, steering onto a two-lane road.

"I know you think we should stay off the main highway, Kyle, but this is kind of ridiculous," said Janice.

"Yeah, look how dark it is," said Dolly. "There's not even any moonlight. If the car dies and the battery goes dead we won't even be able to see our own hands in front of our faces."

"Oh, Dolly," said Janice, "don't so melodramatic."

"Well," said Kyle, "we just need to get as far away from Mary Goldalore as possible right now."

"Quit worrying," said Janice. "There's no way Mary has figured out that I replaced all her jewels with fakes. It would take a jeweler to tell the difference. She won't know for months—or maybe even years. And even then, she'll never suspect *me*. We're like sisters." She laughed.

"I'm just playing it safe," said Kyle.

Suddenly there were headlights behind them—approaching fast. Then they saw the flashing lights and heard the siren.

"Were you speeding?" yelled Dolly.

"No," said Kyle. "Maybe a taillight went out. I don't know. But we'll be fine if we just stay cool. Put the bag of jewelry on the floorboard, Dolly—under your feet."

Kyle pulled over. They heard a car door open and close. Then they saw a very bright flashlight coming up from the rear. They couldn't see the man holding it. They could only hear his voice.

"Kyle Pickerpan?"

How could this cop know his name? Had Mary Goldalore somehow already realized she'd been conned?

"I need you to get out and step to the rear of the car—all three of you."

Janice thought the voice seemed familiar.

The three criminals got out and went to the back of the Suburban. They still couldn't see the officer—only his blinding flashlight.

"Okay," said the cop, "I'm going to give you a chance."

The three looked at each other. What was he talking about?

"I'm going to count to three...before I start shooting."

There was no time to react. The cop said, "Three," and began firing.

Janice lunged to the side and fell into a deep ditch that ran alongside the road. She heard Kyle grunt and then heard Dolly scream just before their bodies fell lifelessly to the ground.

She tried to run away, but her feet kept slipping in the mud. Then the beam of his flashlight found her, and she knew it was over.

"You can't get away from me," he said.

Suddenly Janice knew his identity. It wasn't a policeman at all. It was—

Before she could finish her thought, there was a flash at the muzzle, a bullet through the brain.

* * * * *

"Could I please have another cup of coffee, Charles," said Mary.

"Yes, Ma'am," he quickly picked up the pot, walked over to the breakfast nook and filled her cup. "Beautiful morning, Ma'am."

"Yes, it certainly is." She took a sip of her coffee. "Are you absolutely sure you want to move to Miami? I hear it's a lot more humid down there than it is here in Atlanta."

"I don't mind the humidity, Ma'am."

"I know," said Mary. "You just want to make a lot of money."

"Well, it is a great opportunity. I've always wanted to run a bar on the beach. And my brother's got the deal all lined up."

"I'm sure it will work out just fine. But I'm really going to miss you around here."

"I'll miss you too, Ma'am."

"Oh, no you won't, Charles." She laughed. "Now, you *are* giving me two weeks to find a replacement, right?"

"Oh, of course. I wouldn't want to put you in a bind."

"Good. Thanks. By the way, I hate that you missed all the excitement around here yesterday."

"Oh, you mean the big showdown between Janice and that Kyle character?"

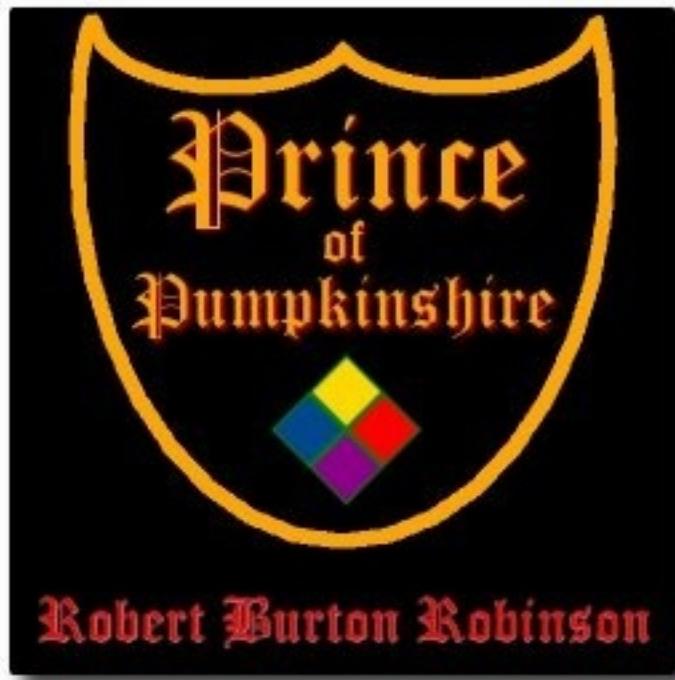
"Yes. It was great," said Mary. "We got him good." She smiled and then took a long sip from her coffee cup.

"Well, I'm sorry I missed it, Ma'am." Charles turned around to put the coffee pot back in its place. "But I enjoyed my day off." He smiled slyly to himself.

"I enjoyed it very much."

THE END

PRINCE OF PUMPKINSHIRE



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GENRE: Humor. LENGTH: 1,898 words. SYNOPSIS: Chip's life is changed forever after an encounter with bullies in the woods on Halloween night.

* * * * *

Today I turned 13. My birthday party was cool. I got a lot of stuff I wanted—and one thing I *didn't* want: a personal journal.

Journals are for girls. But my mother gave me this thing and she said I have to at least give it a try. And that it's the least I can do after she spent money on it.

I wish she had bought me another video game instead. (Are you reading this, Mom? Why are you snooping into my stuff?)

Okay. Might as well get it over with.

Tomorrow is Halloween—and it's going to be the best one ever. Although, it's going to be hard to top last year. It was a game changer. With a little help from my big brother, Dale, I became a man. (Are you freaking out yet, Mom? That's what you get for snooping. Better stop reading now.)

By the way, my name is Chip. Get it? I'm Chip. My older brother is Dale. Very funny, huh? Seems like my parents didn't develop a sense of humor until I was born. Otherwise they would have named their *first* son Chip and their *second* son Dale. Maybe when I popped out they just started laughing for the first time in their lives.

Anyway, back to my story about how I became a man.

It was Halloween night. My best friend Jimmy and I were dressed up like Peanut M&Ms. Why did we choose little kid costumes? (1) We're both short for our age. (2) Little kids get more candy—especially if they're dressed up really cute.

We never even have to leave my neighborhood. By the time we get back to my house our bags are

overflowing. We pig-out until we barf. Then we pig-out some more.

My brother, Dale, is sixteen, but he's not much taller than me. We invited him to go with us.

"No thanks, guys," he said. "I'm a solo act. You get more candy that way. If you go to the door in a crowd, each kid gets just one thing. But when you're standing there all alone—like you have no friends, they usually feel sorry for you and drop a big handful of stuff in your bag."

Jimmy and I admire Dale's mastery of the art of trick-or-treatery. And we could see his point. But we liked going together.

We always start at the back of the neighborhood and work our way up to my house—because the bags get pretty heavy toward the end. But last year, things didn't go so well. When we got back to my house our bags were only half full.

So, we decided to go over to Jimmy's neighborhood, Forest Ridge. It's a long walk by road, so we always take the shortcut through the woods.

There was no moon that night, so the woods were completely black. But we had our flashlights. Besides, as many times as we've walked that trail, we probably could have done it with our eyes closed.

We were about halfway through the woods when three guys jumped out from the darkness, blocking the trail. They were over six feet tall, dressed like actors from a Robin Hood movie.

Jimmy and I were about to walk around them, when one of them said, "Halt, ye peasants!"

Cool, I thought. These guys are staying in character—even when they're not begging for candy. But they couldn't be getting much anyway. They were way too old for trick-or-treating.

Then the two outer guys drew their swords. I knew they had to be plastic, but they looked very real.

"I am the Prince of Pumpkinshire," said the middle one, "and this is my sheriff," nodding to the one on his right.

Yes, I could see him as a prince. Very believable costume.

"You will bow down and worship the prince!" said the sheriff.

Jimmy and I looked at each other. It was getting a little weird.

"You will obey...or you shall surely die!"

The sheriff and the deputy stepped toward us, raising their swords.

There was no way we could outrun those big guys. We dropped to our knees.

"There is a tax to be paid to the prince."

A tax? What the heck?

"Ninety-five percent of your wages."

Ha! Got you there, Buddy. I don't make any wages. I'm only 12. "But..."

The sheriff and his deputy snatched our bags of candy. The bags were only half-full, but we had worked hard for that candy.

"Go, and sin no more," said the prince.

Wait, I thought, isn't that from the *Bible*? These guys are fake. What was I thinking—of course they were fake. They were just bullies who steal candy from young little kids. But Jimmy and I aren't little. Well, we're *little*—but we're not young.

All three of them began to laugh as they turned to walk away. Not a modern laugh—it was a *Medieval* laugh. Picture a fat guy, dressed in fancy, heavy clothes, sitting at a table eating a huge turkey leg, drinking wine out of a big metal goblet. Can you hear the laugh?

"Hey, you said ninety-five percent," I yelled.

The sheriff threw a couple of Snickers over his shoulder, and laughed even harder.

I said we should go after them. Jimmy agreed. Then he got sick and went home.

What a bust. It was supposed to be the greatest night of the year. The candy was free. And your parents let you eat all you wanted—even if it made you sick. But now it was ruined.

As I walked home with my head held low, I unwrapped the Snicker bar and started to eat it. But it only reminded me of how those bullies had laughed at us. I took it out of my mouth and threw it as hard as I could. Then I thought, what if a dog eats it? The chocolate might kill him. So what? I was mad. I should have

stood up to those bullies.

When I got back home I went to Dale's room and knocked on the door.

"Come in, Butthead."

Dale was sprawled out across his bed watching TV. He tossed a handful of Skittles at his open mouth. A few of them fell on the floor. He didn't seem to notice or care. Why should he? His trick or treat bag was filled to the top.

"Where did you get all that?"

"Right here in the neighborhood," he mumbled and chewed.

"We only got half a bag."

"So did I—the first time around."

"The *first* time around?"

"Yeah. Then I came back and changed into my other costume."

"Where did you get another costume?"

"I saved the one from last year."

I told him what had happened to me and Jimmy.

He got mad. "Chip! You've got to learn to stand up to bullies."

* * * * *

On my way into the woods, I wondered how Jimmy was doing. Maybe his mom felt sorry for him and gave him all the leftover trick-or-treat candy in the house. Or maybe he had cried himself to sleep. I hoped not. Come on, Jimbo, we're twelve—not five.

I was halfway through the woods when I heard, "Halt!"

I shined my flashlight up at the three towering Medievals.

"I am the Prince of Pumpkinshire, and this is *my* forest."

The sheriff and his deputy drew their swords. "You will bow down and worship the prince!" said the sheriff.

Here we go again. I got down on my knees.

"You must pay taxes to the kingdom. You will give up your belongings...or your head!" They raised their swords.

"Please, Sire, I pray thee. Accept my humble offering." I placed my bag on the ground in front of me.

"Let us see if your offering be worthy of the prince," said the sheriff, nodding for the deputy to pick up the bag.

The deputy returned his sword to its scabbard, stepped forward and retrieved my bag. He moved back and seemed to be trying to evaluate it based on weight. Then he got a whiff. "This candy stinks! It smells like —"

"—dog poop?" I said, rising to my feet. "Not just *any* dog poop. That's fresh, Grade-A stuff."

The sheriff spat on the ground and said, "You have insulted the prince!"

"Off with his head," said the prince.

The deputy tossed the bag into the woods. He and the prince drew their swords. All three were poised to attack.

"Wait," I said. "Am I not entitled to last words?"

The prince seemed amused. "Yes. Say your final words, peasant."

"Thank you, Sire. These are my final words: the place you *are* is the place you're *in*."

"What does *that* mean?" For the first time, the prince sounded like a high school senior instead of a Medieval prince.

"I believe the meaning is quite clear, Your Majesty," I said. "The place you *are* is the place you're *in*. You're *in*—get it? *Urine*."

"What?" said the sheriff.

I reached for the Super Soaker water gun that was strapped to my back. "You can't imagine how much Coke I had to drink to get this much pee, Your Majesty."

Before they could decide whether to attack or retreat, I blasted all three of them in the face with my warm, liquid ammo.

They screamed like little girls, dropping their plastic swords and fleeing into the darkness. I think one of them ran into a tree.

* * * * *

The next morning I was sitting on the back seat of the school bus when Kyle got on. The six-foot-five quarterback bypassed five or six empty seats on his way to my seat.

What was Kyle doing on the bus? He was a senior. His dad must have taken his driver's license away again.

He plopped down next to me, elbowing my ribs in the process. "So, how's it hanging, Chippy?" He reached for my left nipple.

I blocked his hand. No nipple twisting today, I assured myself.

He was about to go for the other one, when I said, "You were great in the movie."

"What movie?"

"The one my brother shot last night. I can't wait to upload it to the web."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do, Your Majesty."

He looked confused, then angry. "How did you know it was me?"

"I didn't know for sure—until now."

Clearly, he wanted to rip my head off.

I went on. "The mighty Prince of Pumpkinshire—slain in battle."

"Shut up!" He checked to see if anybody was looking or listening. Then he whispered, "I'll kill you."

"No, you won't. You'll never touch me again—unless you want to see your little movie on YouTube. And the next time I run into you and your friends at the mall I'll command you to bark like a dog. And you *will*."

Kyle was speechless.

"Now get out of my sight. You make me sick." I said it loud enough for everybody to hear.

He got up and moved to a seat near the front of the bus.

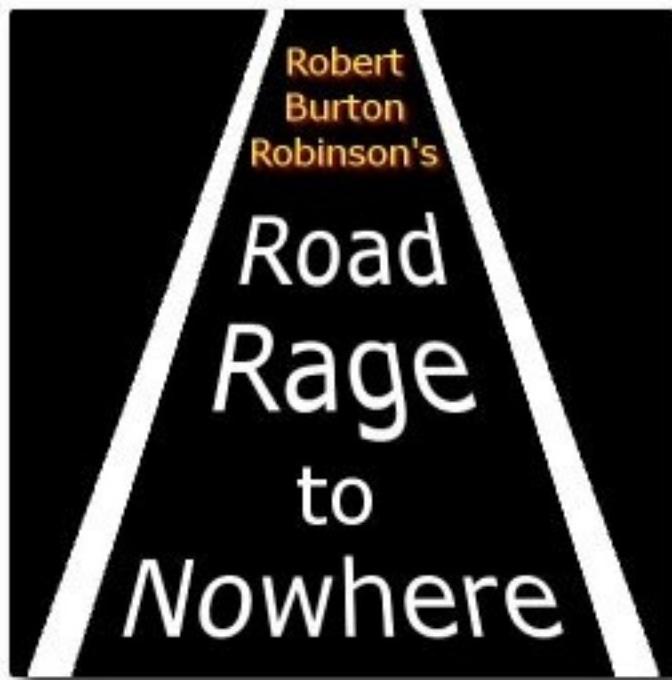
Kyle's been avoiding me ever since that day.

And that is how I, with the help of my brother, dethroned the evil Prince of Pumpkinshire...and became a man.

(Did my story scare you, Mom? Good. Then I think we can agree that I don't need to write in this stupid thing anymore. Journals are for girls, Mom.)

THE END

ROAD RAGE TO NOWHERE



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GENRE: Suspense/Crime. LENGTH: 1,264 words. SYNOPSIS: Road Rage can take you on a trip to somewhere you've never been. And make you wish you hadn't gone.

* * * *

Miguel pushed his cart to the front of the small grocery store. Just as he reached an empty checkout lane and began to place his items on the conveyor belt, a tall man in a business suit slipped in past him and handed a jug of milk to the cashier.

The man glanced back at Miguel. "I only have this one thing. I'm sure you don't mind."

Why should I mind? thought Miguel. After all, you're white. And you've been working in a nice office all day making tons of money. And you probably think I'm an Illegal—right? He started to say it all out loud.

But the man had already paid the cashier and rushed out the door.

When Miguel walked out of the store he saw the man sitting in a silver Lexus SUV. Why was he still hanging around? Thought you were in a hurry, Chump.

The man watched Miguel walk across the parking lot to a beat-up Ford Ranger extended cab. When Miguel was about to open the driver's door, the man rolled down his front passenger window and yelled, "Hey! Stop!"

Miguel wondered why Mr. Big Shot was hollering at him. Maybe he felt bad about the way he had broken in line, and wanted to apologize. Yeah, right. He got into his truck, placing the two plastic grocery bags on the passenger floorboard. As he drove away he saw the man in his rear view mirror, standing in the middle of the parking lot, yelling and waving his arms.

Miguel had been on the road less than a minute when he saw headlights coming up fast from behind. The guy got right on his bumper and wouldn't back off—no matter whether Miguel sped up or slowed down. There were no other cars on the road.

Miguel rolled down his window and waved for the man to go around.
But the man seemed determined to ride his tail all the way. Then he started flashing his headlights.

This guy's nuts, thought Miguel. Just a tap on the brakes would cause a collision.

The man kept flashing his headlights like crazy.

Miguel exited onto a dark two-lane road.

The Lexus followed him.

Miguel stomped on the accelerator.

The Lexus stayed right behind him.

Enough, thought Miguel. He slowed down and pulled to the side of the road.

The Lexus pulled over and stopped behind him.

Miguel jumped out of his truck, hopping mad. He didn't even bother to turn off the engine or shut his door. He stormed up to the man's window and screamed, "What's your problem, Man?"

The guy rolled down his window.

Miguel was not about to back down, even though he could see that the man was upset too. "Get out of your car and let's settle this right now!"

"But—"

"—but nothing! I'm sick and tired of being treated like this. You think I'm illegal, don't you?"

The man started to speak, but Miguel cut him off.

"We'll you're wrong, Man. I'm just as much a citizen of this country as you are. And I work my butt off every day building houses for rich punks like you. But you think that makes you better than me, don't you? Just because you work in a nice clean office all day wearing an expensive suit you think you're high class and I'm low class. But I'll tell you right now—if it wasn't for guys like me who are willing to get their hands dirty and work all day in the blazing sun—you wouldn't have any fancy office building to work in."

Miguel noticed the man's right arm beginning to move. It all happened in a split-second, but it seemed like much longer—as in slow motion. He could barely see the man's arm in the glow of the instrument panel lights as he raised it higher and higher.

Had he underestimated this guy? Was that a *gun* in the man's right hand? Miguel knew he would not be able to react fast enough. If the man wanted to kill him—he would be dead in two seconds.

Then he saw what was in the man's hand. Nothing. He was pointing at Miguel's truck.

Miguel turned his head just in time to see his truck beginning to move forward. Had he left it in gear?

Then he saw a hand pull the door closed. The truck sped away.

Miguel looked the man, confused.

"That's what I was trying to tell you. I saw a man get into your back seat as I was coming out of the store. And I thought he looked suspicious, so I wanted to warn the owner of the truck. But I didn't realize that you were the owner until I saw you walk over to it. I yelled to try to get your attention. But you ignored me. So, I followed you."

"I'm sorry, Man. I thought you were—"

"—you thought I was crazy. I know. Maybe if I hadn't been so rude in the store. Sorry about that."

"It's okay."

"Well, hop in. Let me take you home, or wherever you need to go."

"Thanks, Man." Miguel walked around to the passenger side and got in.

"What's your name?"

"Miguel."

"Glad to meet you, Miguel. I'm Jack. If you want, I'll follow that guy. We could probably still catch up with him."

"That's okay. I was about ready to replace that old truck anyway. It's a piece of junk."

Jack smiled as he reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a business card, and handed it to Miguel. "Jack's Used Cars. I can make you a great deal on a fine pre-owned automobile, Miguel."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, not at all. How much are you looking to spend? What kind of monthly note can you handle?"

"Get out."

"What?"

"You heard me. Get out!" Miguel reached under his shirt and pulled out a pistol. "Now!"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I don't appreciate your attitude, Jack."

"What? I was just trying to help you."

"Fine. You've helped me. Thanks for the car. Now get out!"

Now it all made sense to Jack. "That guy who stole your car—you two are working together, aren't you?"

"Good for you, Jack. You figured it out. You're a smart guy. Or at least you were until five seconds from now when you're gonna be dead!"

Jack held up his hands. "Okay, okay." He opened the door and began to get out.

"Wait," said Miguel.

Jack froze in place.

"I hear sirens. Did you call the police?"

"Well, yeah. I thought that guy might be planning to kill you, so I called 9-1-1."

"Get back in."

"Are you sure?"

"Get in the car!"

Miguel opened his door and got out. The sirens were coming toward them from behind.

"Take off. And drive as fast as you can." Jack slammed the door. "Now!" He pointed the gun. "Or I'm gonna start shooting. Go!"

Jack peeled out and drove away.

Miguel hid in the nearby bushes while the two police cars raced by. Then he walked out to the road and stood there watching, as the flashing lights got smaller and finally disappeared.

Fools, thought Miguel.

He took out his cell phone. "Hey, come back and get me...Yeah, he called the cops...It's no big deal, Man. It won't take long to find another sucker. But hurry up—before they come back here."

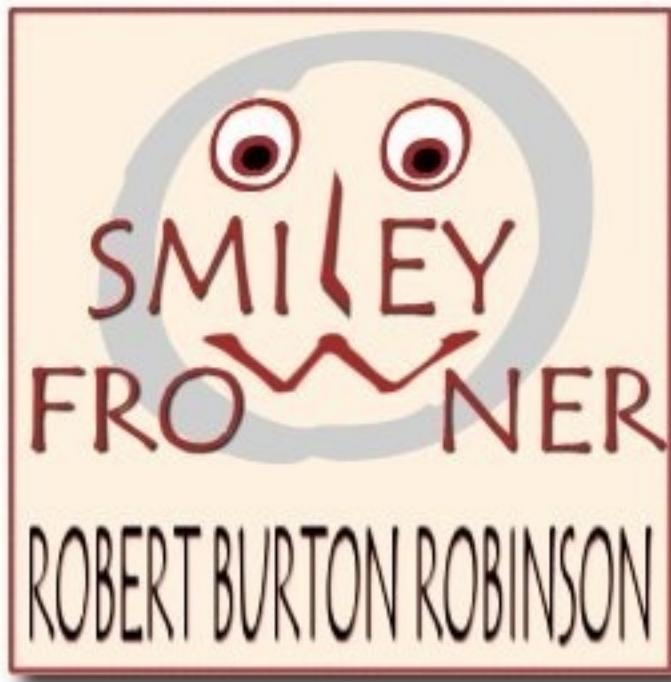
Only two patrol cars had responded to Jack's 9-1-1 call. Miguel was surprised there weren't more.

There were. The third cop was trying to catch up—driving 125 mph, without siren or flashing lights.

It was already too late to get out of the road by the time Miguel heard the car coming up from behind.

THE END

SMILEY FROWNER



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GENRE: Fantasy/Horror. LENGTH: 1,908 words. SYNOPSIS: Five-year-old Jessica doesn't go anywhere without Smiley—the handmade doll that protects her from the evils of the world.

* * * *

Amber had been driving to Wal-Mart with her five-year-old daughter, Jessica, when she spotted the garage sale sign.

“Why are there so many dolls?” said Amber.

The woman sighed. “Because it’s the only thing of value my sister owned. She didn’t believe in savings accounts or investments...or burial insurance.”

Then it clicked. Amber remembered the horrific story from a recent newspaper article. The cops said it was a murder-suicide of a little girl and her foster parents. The young child had been strangled in her high chair. Then the man stabbed his wife in the chest and slit his own throat. These dolls had belonged to that poor woman. Perhaps a few of them had been the little girl’s.

Amber began to get the creeps and wished she hadn’t stopped. Most of the dolls were too expensive anyway. She walked down to where Jessica was standing, in front of a box of dolls priced at five dollars. Most were missing arms or legs.

“Look what I found, Mommy,” said Jessica, clutching an old hand-sewn doll. The smiley face and pink dress had been drawn onto the off-white material with some type of markers.

“Oh, Honey, it’s dirty.”

“I don’t care, Mommy. I want her.”

Amber took the doll and examined it carefully. She pictured the child in the high chair holding the doll. She saw the girl’s little arms go limp as the life went out of her.

“I don’t know, Jessie.”

"Please, Mommy. Please."

At least there was no blood on the doll. Hopefully it had not been in the room. She gave it back to Jessica.
"Let's go talk to the lady about it."

They walked back down to the woman.

"So, you're asking five dollars for this one?" said Amber.

Jessica held up the doll.

When the woman saw it, she immediately looked away. "That doll should not have been in the five-dollar box."

Jessica's hopeful smile faded. She turned the doll around to look at its face. The doll's smile was gone too. It seemed just as sad as Jessica.

"So, how much do you want for it?"

"Nothing. It's free," said the woman, still looking away. "Just get it out of here."

The doll's frown turned into a smile, and Jessica hugged her new best friend.

Once they were back in the car, Jessica said, "Mommy, I love Smiley." She hugged the doll with all her might.

"That's a good name for him."

"Her," Jessica corrected. "Her name is Smiley Frowner."

Frowner? Okay—kinda weird, thought Amber. Hopefully by the end of the week Miss Smiley would find her rightful place at the bottom of Jessica's toy box.

* * * * *

Twenty-seven year-old Brandy was on her way out of Wal-Mart when she passed a woman about her age with a young girl. She looked familiar. Then it hit her: it was the woman from the newspaper—the one who married that rich old fart.

That's what I need, she thought—a sugar daddy. Ryan was never going to amount to anything. She should have dumped him in high school.

* * * * *

"Mommy, can I please get a new coloring book?"

"Jessie, I just bought you one last week."

"I know, Mommy, but I want a different one."

Jessica had already discovered the persuasive powers of a sad face.

"Oh, alright." Amber squatted in front of her daughter. "You can stay here and pick out a coloring book while I go right over there and look at the purses."

Jessica grinned. "Okay, Mommy."

"But you have to promise to stay right here until I get back."

"I will, Mommy. I will."

"Okay then." Amber gave her a quick peck on the lips. "I'll be back in just a few minutes."

Jessica and Smiley had been looking through the large collection of coloring books for several minutes when Brandy rushed up to her.

"Little girl?"

"My name is Jessica."

"Good. You're the one I'm looking for. Your mommy slipped and fell down. They're taking her to the hospital."

"No, my mommy's right over there," she said, pointing to the purses. But she didn't see her mother.

"No. She's on her way to the hospital. And she asked me to take you there." Brandy held out her hand.
"Let's go."

Jessica began to cry. "I want my Mommy."

"I know, Sweetie. I'm gonna take you to her."

* * * * *

"I thought we were going to the hospital," said Jessica.

"Your mommy's gonna come here to my house and pick you up." Brandy killed the engine. "Hey, how about a big glass of milk and some chocolate chip cookies?"

Jessica frowned.

"Don't be sad. Your mommy will be here soon."

Brandy took Jessica into the house.

Her boyfriend, Ryan, was lying on the couch watching TV. "Who's this?"

"This is Jessica. Her mother had an accident at Wal-Mart and had to be rushed to the hospital. I told her I would watch Jessica for her."

"Come over here and sit at the table, Sweetie, and I'll get your milk and cookies."

While Jessica was eating her cookies, Brandy walked over to Ryan.

He grabbed the TV remote, lowered the volume, and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"I'm about to make us rich."

Ryan glanced over at Jessica and then looked back at Brandy. "What have you done?"

"Don't you recognize her?"

He took another look. "No."

"You know the woman who married that rich dude? What's his name? The *old* guy. It was in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago."

"That's the daughter?"

Brandy smiled. "Yeah. And they're gonna have to pay a lot of money to get her back."

"You idiot! She's seen our faces."

"No problem, Baby. We'll move to Mexico. Cancun."

"You're crazy. Absolutely nuts."

"Yeah, I'm crazy. And we're gonna be crazy rich."

His scowl turned into a greedy grin. "We'll never have to work again."

"We'll just lay out on the beach all day."

A special news bulletin interrupted the TV show.

"There she is—that's the mother."

"Are you sure?"

"Turn it up."

As they listened to the news report, the reality of the situation began to sink in. Jessica's parents were not rich at all. Brandy had kidnapped the child of some middle-class couple.

"Great," said Ryan. "Now what are we gonna do? We're not going to Cancun. We're going to prison."

"No, we're not. I'll tell the police I was just trying to help the little girl. I'll say she was wandering down the sidewalk and I picked her up."

"What about the lies you told the girl? You said her mother had an accident and went to the hospital. She's gonna tell the police."

"Go outside and have a smoke," said Brandy. "I'll take care of this."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go!"

Ryan grabbed his cigarettes and lighter and walked out to the front yard.

Brandy went into the kitchen. "How are those cookies?"

"Good," said Jessica.

Brandy walked over to the sink and turned on the cold water. She flipped a switch and the garbage disposal came to life. Then she opened a drawer and selected a very large, very sharp knife.

She turned around and said, "I'm afraid your mommy's not coming."

"Why?"

Brandy walked toward her with the knife.

Jessica dropped her cookie on the table, picked up Smiley, and looked into the doll's face. "I'm scared, Smiley."

Smiley frowned.

Jessica turned Smiley around to face Brandy, who was now standing over them, holding the knife in the air.

Brandy looked at Smiley's face. It unnerved her to see that the painted-on smile had somehow changed to a frown. But it wouldn't stop her from chopping Jessica into pieces and stuffing the little body parts down the garbage disposal.

Suddenly Brandy felt her body being sucked back toward the sink. Her spine hit the edge of the counter with such force that she dropped the knife. She couldn't bend over to pick it up. She couldn't move. Her body would not obey her brain.

Smiley's head suddenly ballooned into something monstrous. The expression on its face was more frightening than anything Brandy had ever seen. Her heart pounded ferociously.

The knife flew into the air and hung suspended directly in front of her.

"Jessica? What are you doing? Please don't hurt me!"

The knife jutted toward her and then back—the movement too swift for her eyes to follow.

Had she been cut? She didn't think so—until she saw something dripping from the blade.

She felt a twinge in her left shoulder. Then excruciating pain. Blood began to gush down her left arm. Her shoulder popped out of its socket. Flesh ripped. Her arm fell to the floor like a fresh cut of beef.

She screamed. "What are you doing to me?"

The knife flashed again. Her right arm tore off and hit the floor. Smiley's head grew even larger, until it filled the room. His horrifying face was two inches from Brandy's.

She trembled uncontrollably. "No. Please."

She had forgotten all about the garbage disposal until she heard the grinding behind her.

She turned around to see one of her detached arms being gobbled up. Her fingers seemed to wave goodbye as they disappeared into the drain. She heard her grandmother's wedding ring clanging around for a moment.

Her other arm went down fast, as the drain seemed to open its mouth wider. She could see the shiny, buzzing teeth.

Brandy's legs suddenly yanked in opposite directions, dropping her torso the floor. Her legs shot up to her sides until both feet kicked her in the head. Then they mercifully dropped back down—only to be chopped off.

Once the disposal had chewed and swallowed the two legs, she felt herself begin to float. Smiley manipulating her body like a puppet master.

The drain grew even larger. What was left of her began to rise above the sink. The rate and volume of blood pumping out of her body began to surpass that of the water flowing from the faucet.

She went into the sharp metal teeth head first. Once her head was chewed off at the neck, the drain expanded further, and her torso was sucked down whole.

Finally, the disposal turned off and the water stopped running.

Smiley was back to normal.

Jessica turned her around and hugged her. Jessica had not heard or seen anything.

* * * * *

"Are you okay, Honey? Maybe you should sleep with Mommy and Daddy tonight," said Amber.

Surely Jessica would have nightmares. According to the police, the boyfriend had cut up his girlfriend's body and put it down the garbage disposal. Then he had stuffed ten cigarettes down his throat and choked to death. Very strange.

Jessica said she hadn't seen anything. But what if she was just blocking it out of her mind? What would happen when it all started to come back to her?

"Really, Jessie. I think you should sleep with us."

"Smiley and I want to sleep in our own room. It's her first night."

"Well, okay. I guess we can try it. But if you and Smiley get scared, just come and jump in bed with us."

"Okay, Mommy. But we won't get scared."

She kissed Jessica.

"Kiss Smiley too."

"Okay." She kissed the doll. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mommy."

Amber turned off the light and walked out, closing the door behind her.

Jessica could see Smiley in the dim rays of her nightlight.

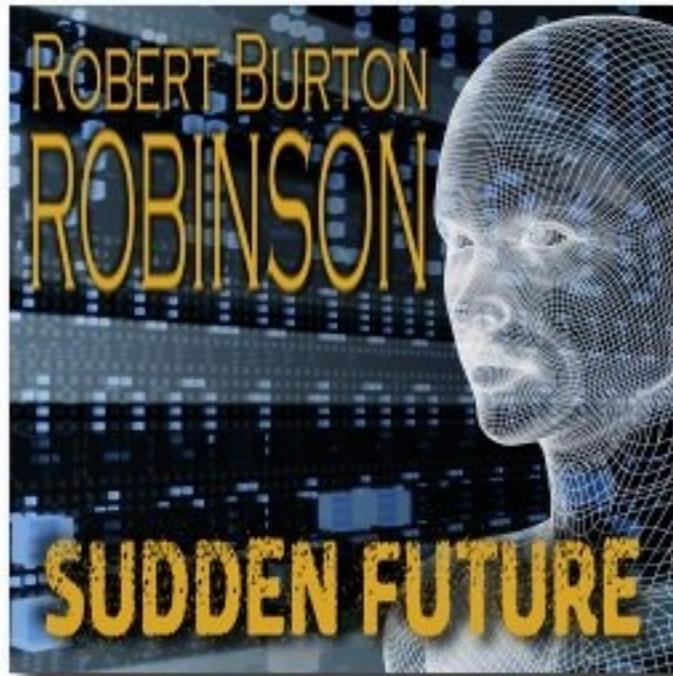
"I love you, Smiley Frowner."

The painted-on smile broadened.

Jessica held Smiley in her arms as she drifted into a peaceful night's sleep.

THE END

SUDDEN FUTURE



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GENRE: Sci-Fi/Fantasy. LENGTH: 6,248 words. SYNOPSIS: A brother and sister are thrust into the future after playing around with some experimental equipment in the basement built by their mother, a physics professor.

* * * *

Ryan Edison stood at the back of a long line of junior high and high school students boarding the school bus to go home. In two years he'd graduate and move on to better things—like college, in a different town where nobody knew about the time he got his head dunked into a toilet in the girls bathroom. Those stupid bullies were still laughing about that.

But least he wouldn't have to ride the bus with them anymore—not after next Thursday when he got his driver's license. His mom was giving him her old car. Ryan couldn't think of anything he loved her for more. Sure, she brought him into the world, gave him food and clothing and everything else he had—but his own car—that was the ultimate gift.

Just a few more days on this stinking bus.

His younger sister, Abby, was sitting in her usual spot with her BFF, Meg, right behind the driver.

She grinned at Ryan.

Sure, why shouldn't she be happy? Nobody was gonna try to embarrass her. He frowned at her and walked down the aisle, looking for an empty seat.

The only seat left was at the back, between Kevin and Carl.

"Don't worry, Ryan," Kevin said with a wily grin, "we saved you a seat, buddy."

Ryan rescanned the entire bus. Surely there was another opening somewhere. But, no.

Melissa Myers was in the next-to-last row. She smiled at him.

Ryan was so in love with Melissa. He'd hardly spoken a word to her all year since she transferred in. They had four classes together and all he ever did was stare at her. Why was she smiling at him? He didn't deserve it. She should have thought he was creepy—always looking at her, but never talking. Maybe she was just trying to be kind to the weirdo.

"Hey, Edison, hurry it up," Carl said, "the bus ain't going anywhere until you sit down."

Kevin was pigging out on a large bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos. "Look at him—a skinny stick with fuzzy blond mop top. What does that remind you of?"

"I don't know," Carl said, grinning. "What?"

"He kinda looks like a big tampon, don't you think?"

Some of the kids laughed.

Melissa looked away, obviously embarrassed.

The bus driver yelled, "Sit down back there!"

Ryan squeezed in between Kevin and Carl.

The bus pulled away from the school.

Kevin turned to Ryan and began talking. His mouth was three inches from Ryan's face. The nacho cheese breath burned his nose. "So, you like her?" He nodded to Melissa. "You like Melissa, don't you?" He grabbed Ryan's face with both hands and turned his head toward himself. "I can tell. I can see it in your eyes. You want to go out with her." He released Ryan's head and leaned up toward Melissa. "Melissa, would you go out with our boy, Ryan? He's kinda shy, so I'm trying to help him out. Is he the kind of guy you're looking for? Is he man enough for you?"

Melissa did not turn around or respond in any way.

"Leave her alone," Ryan said.

Kevin thumped Melissa on the back of the head with his finger. "I'm talking to you, girl."

"Stop it!" Ryan elbowed Kevin in the chest as hard as he could. He regretted it immediately.

Kevin tore into Ryan with his fists, battering him in the stomach and face.

Carl pushed Ryan out of his seat onto the aisle floor.

Other boys began to offer advice. "Stomp his face! Kick him in the nuts!"

The bus driver yelled, "Stop that fighting!" He pulled over to the side of the road. "Whoever started the fight—get off of the bus. Now!"

"I started it." Ryan got up from the floor, walked to the front of the bus, and got off. On the way out the door he apologized to the bus driver.

As the bus pulled away, Ryan saw Kevin pointing and laughing at him through the back window. Carl shot him the bird.

* * * * *

Ryan walked in the front door of his house and saw Abby sitting on the couch watching TV while talking on the phone, with her laptop sitting beside her.

Abby paused the TV show. "I'll call you back in a minute." She put her phone down and looked at Ryan.

"Why did it take you so long to walk home?"

"I wasn't in any hurry."

"Needed time to think, huh? Why did you start a fight anyway?"

"Kevin Pilcher's got a big, fat, dirty mouth."

"He said something about Melissa, didn't he?"

"What? No."

Abby grinned. "I can tell when you're lying, Ryan. You love her."

"Shut up!" He walked over to the couch, picked up the remote, and turned off the TV. "You know you're supposed to do all your homework before you turn the TV on."

Abby pointed to her laptop. "I am doing my homework."

"While watching TV and talking to Meg? I don't think so."

"I'm multitasking—and I'm very good at it." Abby smirked.

"You're way smarter than me, but you just don't care. You do everything halfway just because you can get away with it."

"I must be doing something right—my teachers love me." She grinned proudly.

"Whatever." Ryan dropped the remote and the couch and walked over to the basement door.

"You're not supposed to go into Mom's lab unless she's down there."

"I need to use her computer to do research for my paper. My laptop is acting up again."

"Yeah, right. Research."

Ryan opened the basement door and went downstairs.

* * * * *

Ryan loved going down to his mother's lab. Tora Edison was a professor at the university. Her expertise in both physics and computer science gave the small school a double whammy for their money. But the work she did on campus was not nearly as interesting to Ryan as what she did in her home lab. He wondered if the other professors had any idea what she was up to.

He had helped his mother move most of the equipment to the basement, which would have been impossible to do were it not for the elevator she had installed two years ago. The neighbors had been curious when they saw the elevator company truck out front. She had explained that was for her mother, who would be coming to live with us soon. It was a lie that nobody would have believed if they knew Grandma. She would live in her own house until the day she died.

The lab had a distinctive aroma of warm computers and natural gas powered backup generator that often kicked in when Tora was running one of her experiments. Ryan suspected they were breaking several zoning laws.

He wondered, but never asked, how his mother was able to pay for all this high tech stuff. The 3-D printer cost over \$35,000. He had googled it.

Tora's coolest invention was a device she called the *Galaxy Exploration Chair*. The chair itself was just a leather recliner. What made it special was the clear plastic helmet suspended over the chair. When you pulled it down over your head you could go just about anywhere. Signals were sent via the eyes to the brain, triggering all five senses. A basic test of the system transported the subject virtually to a field of lilies. You could see and smell the flowers, feel the warm sun on your face, hear birds chirping nearby, pull a glade of grass and taste it. It was virtual reality at its best.

You could pop into another country, walk the streets, watch the people, listen. But they couldn't see you because you weren't really there.

You could even make a trip to outer space and float around for a while, observing planets. Although the space trips weren't very realistic since a person couldn't actually survive in outer space without a protective suit.

Tora had recently built a second Galaxy Exploration Chair so that Ryan and Abby could make virtual trips together. She would make notes as they reported their experiences real-time.

Ryan slid into one of the GECs and pulled the helmet down over his head. A holographic control panel appeared before his eyes. He reached out with his hand and touched the destination menu and selected Galaxy 7.

When he heard the door open at the top of the stairs, he knew it was Abby. It would be at least another hour before his mother got home.

"You know we're not allowed to use the GECs unless Mom's here."

"I know exactly what I'm doing."

"She just called and told me she's going to be late."

"You've got to see this, Abby."

"What?"

"Get in the chair. You won't believe this. It's amazing."

"I don't want to get into trouble."

"Just for a minute. Try it. It's beautiful, really."

"Okay. But just for a second." She sat down in the chair and pulled the helmet over her head.

"I'll sync us." Ryan reached out to the holographic control panel and touched the Sync button.

"Wow," Abby said.

"That's what I'm saying."

"I've never seen anything like this," Abby said. "Which galaxy are we in?"

"I don't know. It's a new program. Mom must have just added it." He reached out to the control panel and touched the Program menu. "Hey, I wonder what this Galaxy 8 is like? I'm switching us."

"No, don't switch me. I want to stay in this one."

"Just real quick, and then I'll take us back."

The display inside their helmets flashed, *Changing to Galaxy 8*.

"I don't see much difference in this one," Ryan said.

"This isn't pretty at all. Take us back to the other one."

"Fine." He tapped the Program menu. "Hey, I wonder what this is?"

Their helmets displayed, *Changing to Program X*.

"What are you doing, Ryan?" Abby asked.

Their displays went black and all of the lights in the basement went out.

Abby gasped.

"It's okay, Abby. Don't worry. The electricity just went out."

Something began to hum at the back of the basement.

"What's that?" Abby asked.

"The backup generator."

"So, why aren't the lights coming on?"

Their chairs began to vibrate. The displays in their helmets went from complete darkness to blinding

light.

"Ryan, I'm scared."

The chairs shook violently.

"Get out of the chair!" Ryan yelled, trying to get his helmet off.

"I can't get this thing off," Abby shouted. "I can't even feel it on my head!"

"I can't feel mine either. I don't know what's happening." He looked over at Abby. All he could see was something that looked like a computer-generated outline of her body: a white, Abby-shaped grid glowing in the dark—with no hair on her head. His voice trembled. "Abby, something very weird is happening. Can you see me?"

She looked at him and screamed.

* * * * *

Ryan and Abby were sitting on a bench in an ultramodern-looking shopping mall next to a large statue of a woman holding a shopping bag.

"Where are we?" Abby asked.

Ryan looked around. "Looks like Program X took us to some kind of future world."

Abby felt her head with her hands. "I still can't feel my helmet."

"I can't either."

"What's happening, Ryan? This is not like any of the other times. I'm scared."

"It's okay. I don't know why we can't feel the helmets." He grinned. "But it's a pretty cool upgrade. Makes this world seem so real. Excellent job, Mom."

"It's not cool to me," Abby said. "I just want to go home."

"We are home. We're still sitting in the GECs in Mom's lab. That's what's so cool about it—it seems like we're really here."

"I don't like it being this real."

"But we're fine," Ryan said, "so, let's walk around and check this place out."

"How are we gonna get back home? What if we're stuck here forever?"

"Don't be silly. You know Mom's programs have that auto-return feature."

"But we've never needed it before. We were always able to get out of the program whenever we wanted to. How do we even know if the auto-return works?"

"I'm sure it works. Mom is a genius, you know. And besides, if anything goes wrong with that, she'll just bring us back manually when she gets home."

"And then we're gonna get grounded and I'm gonna miss Meg's party on Friday night. Why did I let you talk me into this?"

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it, so we might as well enjoy it. Hey, look at that candy store. Let's go see what kind of cool new candies they have in the future." Ryan got up and walked toward the candy store.

"Ryan, don't eat anything. You don't know what that stuff's made of." Abby got up and ran after him.

"Check these out." Ryan picked up a sucker labeled 'MagnaPopper' and unwrapped it.

"What are you doing? Don't get us in trouble."

"What are you talking about? Nobody can see us—remember? We can see them, but they can't see us and they can't touch us."

"Are you sure? It feels different this time."

Ryan popped the sucker into his mouth. "Wow. It's got a super strong cherry taste." He took the sucker out of his mouth to study it. "Wonder why they call them MagnaPoppers?"

"Looks just like a Tootsie Roll Pop," Abby said.

The sucker slipped out of Ryan's fingers and it flew into his mouth. He grabbed the sucker and pulled it back out. "What the heck?" He held it two inches from his mouth and let it go. The sucker flew back into his mouth. "This thing is magnetic."

"Right, magnetic," she said, smirking. "What—you think it's got a magnet in the center instead of chocolate? That wouldn't work unless you had metal in your head. Hmm—metal in your head. Actually, I've always wondered about that."

"Shut up," he said. "I don't know what's doing it, but something's making it—"

"Hey, you didn't pay for that." A pudgy man stepped out from behind the counter.

Abby stared at Ryan. "I thought nobody could see us?"

"They can't," Ryan said. "Nobody can see us or touch us."

Abby punched him in the arm.

"Hey," Ryan said.

"I've never been able to do that before."

"Let's get out of here." Ryan threw the sucker toward the back of the store.

The man held up a small device and pushed a button. "You'll never get away from the mall cop."

Ryan and Abby ran for the exit.

A mall cop zoomed up on a cart. "Halt, please."

He stepped off of the cart.

Ryan noticed that the cart didn't have any wheels. "Cool. What keeps it suspended—some type of magnetic field?"

"Don't play dumb with me," the cop said. "Every first grader knows how these things work."

Ryan bent down to look under the cart. "Amazing."

"You two have been reported as shoplifters."

Ryan shrugged. "No, Sir, there's been a mistake. It wasn't us." The MagnaPopper Ryan had thrown away in the store flew through the air, barely missing Abby's head, and popped into Ryan's mouth.

The cop smiled. "Gotcha."

Ryan took the sucker out of his mouth and handed it to the cop.

The cop scanned the sucker with some type of electronic device.

"What are you doing to it?" Ryan asked.

"Disabling the anti-theft seed. That's why it kept popping into your mouth."

"I thought it was magnetic. Isn't that why they call them 'MagnaPoppers'?"

The cop laughed. "No, that's just the brand. I think the 'Magna' has to do with the strong flavor." He handed the sucker back to Ryan.

Ryan held it near his mouth and let it go. It fell to the floor.

The cop laughed. "Might as well pick it up and eat it. Your parents will be billed for it."

"I don't think so," Abby said under her breath.

"What did you say, Miss?"

"I'm sorry. Nothing, Sir."

"It's nine o'clock," the cop said. "Why aren't you two in school?"

"Nine o'clock in the morning?" Abby asked. "No, that's not right—it's like five o'clock. School's already out."

The cop spoke into his wristwatch. "Hey, Joe, I've got two more truants for you."

"Okay, bring them out. I'll be right there to pick them up."

"Wait," Ryan said, "we're not truants. Didn't you hear what my sister said? We already went to school today. We rode the bus home."

"If you rode the bus home, then what are you doing here?"

"We don't know," Abby said. "We were just playing around in my mom's lab and—"

"Lab?" The cop's brows went up.

Ryan jumped into the cart. "That's enough, Abby. The nice officer has been patient with us. We need to quit playing around."

Abby sat down in the cart next to her brother.

The cop got into the driver's seat. "Here we go."

As they rode through the mall, Abby leaned over to Ryan and said, "I've been to a lot of malls, but I've never heard of most of these stores." She saw a woman who looked like her best friend, Meg, but all grown up, spraying potential customers with perfume outside a store. It was funny to think of her friend doing that kind of work. She and Meg were planning to go to college and medical school together.

"Look at that," Ryan said. "A 120-inch flat screen TV for five-hundred dollars. And check out that escalator."

"What are they standing on?" Abby asked. "People are going up, but I don't see anything under their feet."

"This place is very weird," Ryan said.

The mall cop pulled up alongside similar cart labeled 'Truant Police.'

The mall cop said, "Okay, kids, this is Officer Joe. He'll take you to your school."

"Hop on," Officer Joe said.

Ryan and Abby got out of the mall cop's cart and into Officer Joe's, which had bucket seats.

"This feels strange," Abby said.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "It's like something is pushing you down into the seat."

"Sounds like your passenger protectors have engaged, so here we go," Officer Joe said.

Abby stared at Ryan. *Passenger protectors?*

Ryan shrugged.

The cart accelerated quickly to around sixty miles per hour. Ryan hoped the passenger protectors worked, since the cart had no doors and no top.

"Could I please have your names? Officer Joe asked.

"I'm Ryan Edison, and this is my sister, Abby."

Officer Joe glanced at Ryan in the mirror. "So, Ryan, I'm guessing you're in ninth grade."

"Tenth."

"Okay, close." Officer Joe smiled. "Let's see if I can do better with your sister."

"I'm in the tenth grade, like my brother," Abby said.

Ryan wondered why she was lying. "Abby—"

Abby elbowed her brother. "I'm a year younger than Ryan, but I skipped second grade."

"Oh, now why did you have to go and tell me?" Officer Joe asked. "I like guessing."

"Oh," Abby said. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Officer Joe said, winking at her in the mirror.

Abby whispered to Ryan and pointed. "Is that the school?"

They were headed toward a huge metal dome, two-hundred feet tall.

"Can't be," Ryan said.

As they approached the dome, a section of the wall slid open, creating a doorway. The cart entered a huge lobby.

Abby said, "You know he's gonna take us to the principal's office. What are we going to tell them?"

"How should I know?" Ryan spotted the principal's office, with its glass walls. Then he realized that all of the interior walls of the school were made of glass.

They rode right past the principal's office, and then past a classroom labeled 'First Grade.'

"Uh, Sir," Ryan said, "I think you've brought us to the wrong school."

Officer Joe shook his head.

Ryan and Abby looked at each other, confused.

The cart began to lift off the floor, accelerating as it rose: ten feet...twenty-five feet...

Abby leaned in close to her brother and grabbed his hand. "I'm scared."

He put his arm around her.

The cart continue upward. Seventy-five feet...one-hundred feet...one-hundred-fifty feet. It suddenly came to a stop at about one-hundred-seventy-five feet above the lobby floor.

A glass door opened to the fourth floor hallway and Officer Joe drove through it and down the hall to a classroom door labeled 'Tenth Grade.'

Ryan whispered to Abby, "They only have one school—for all the grades?"

"And is there seriously only one tenth grade classroom—in this whole gigantic school?"

"But look how big it is," Ryan said.

There were rows and rows of students—hundreds of them—sitting at what appeared to be computers.

The cart pulled up to a counter and stopped. Ryan and Abby felt their passenger protectors release.

"Out you go," Officer Joe said. "Mrs. Flatback, this is Ryan and Abby. They seemed to have forgotten it was a school day."

A young woman standing behind a long, marble-top counter smiled and said, "Thanks, Joe."

Ryan and Abby stepped out of the cart and Officer Joe drove it out of the classroom.

Mrs. Flatback said, "Okay, sign yourselves in and get to your workstations."

They walked up to the counter.

Ryan looked for a sign-in sheet and a pen. All he saw was something that looked like a touch pad that was built into the counter.

"What are you waiting for?" Mrs. Flatback asked.

"I'm not sure what to do," Ryan said.

"Very funny." Mrs. Flatback grabbed Ryan's right hand and pressed his index finger against the pad. It beeped. She checked her monitor. "That's odd." She looked at Abby. "You give it a try, young lady."

Abby pressed her right index finger against the pad.

It beeped.

Mrs. Flatback snapped her fingers. "Mr. Hall? Mr. Hall, I need you up here."

A man who had been talking to a student near the back of the classroom waved at Mrs. Flatback and began to walk toward the front of the room. Ryan judged him to be at least ninety.

When he finally made it to the counter, Mrs. Flatback said, "We've got a serious problem here, Mr. Hall. These two students are not registered in our system."

"I see." Mr. Hall eyed them suspiciously.

"So, you know what that means, Mr. Hall."

"Yes, Ma'am, I certainly do. And I'll take care of them. Come with me, children."

Children? Ryan was not a child, and he had no interest in going anywhere with this old man. He and Abby had played along with these people for long enough. Ryan wanted to grab Abby's hand and run out of the school, but he wasn't even sure how to get back down to ground level.

Mr. Hall led them to an escalator, and just like the one they'd seen in the mall, it had no stairs—but this one went down in a spiral.

The invisible stairs felt spongy. Ryan nearly lost his balance, grasping for the handrail to keep him from falling on top of Mr. Hall.

Down, down, down they went in a circular motion. It seemed it would never end.

"I'm getting dizzy," Abby said.

"Whatever you do, don't close your eyes," Mr. Hall said.

When they got to the ground floor, Mr. Hall led them to the principal's office.

"Mrs. Davis, these two students do not appear to be in our system."

"I'll take care of it," Mrs. Davis said, smiley politely at Abby and Ryan.

"Thank you very much." Mr. Hall walked out of the office.

Mrs. Davis placed a touch pad on top of the counter. "Let's give it another try."

Abby stepped up and press her finger to the pad.

It beeped.

A man walked up from behind her. "What's the problem, Mrs. Davis?"

Ryan assumed he was the principal.

"Mr. Pilcher, these students don't seem to be in our system."

Ryan's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Mr. Pilcher? *Kevin Pilcher?* The principal was around forty. But he looked suspiciously like Ryan's bus riding nemesis, Kevin Pilcher. It made him wonder if Kevin's sidekick, Carl, was the assistant principal. He nearly started laughing at the thought of it. This wasn't just a future world—it was a wacky world.

"Let Melissa handle this," Mr. Pilcher said, walking over to a doorway and talking to someone inside the room. "We're having more problems with the system."

A strikingly beautiful woman walked out. "I'll take care of it."

Ryan's jaw dropped as she stepped to the counter. It was Melissa Myers, the girl he was madly in love with—whom he had never spoken a word to—now in her late thirties, and more gorgeous than ever.

She eyed Ryan and then Abby. "So, our system doesn't like you today, huh?" She smiled warmly. "Let's just see if we can get it to cooperate." She began typing at the keyboard.

Ryan spotted her name tag: *Melissa Pilcher - Associate Principal*. No, it couldn't be. She wouldn't have

married Kevin Pilcher—not in a million years. “Your last name is Pilcher—the same as the principal’s.”

“That’s because he’s my husband. That’s the way it works.” She smiled. “Now, let’s try it with you, uh...”
She nodded at Ryan.

“Ryan. Ryan Edison.” He was about to puke. How could she stand to even be near Kevin Pilcher, much less be willing to kiss him and...

She flinched. “Ryan Edison?”

Did she remember him? “Yes, Ma’am.” He couldn’t believe he was calling her ‘Ma’am.’ But she was old enough to be his mother!

“Okay, Ryan, please press your right index finger on the touch pad.”

It beeped.

Melissa shook her head. “Hmm.” She looked at Abby. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Abby Edison.”

“Brother and sister. Okay, Abby give it a try.”

When Abby pressed her finger against the pad, it beeped.

“Hmm.” Melissa shook her head as she studied her monitor.

Ryan leaned across the counter and spoke softly so that nobody by Melissa could hear him. “Why did you marry him?”

Melissa looked stunned. “What?”

“How could you marry that...that...butt pimple?”

Melissa stepped back, shocked. “Excuse me?”

Ryan raised his voice. “You knew what kind of guy he was: a mean bully who liked to embarrass kids and beat them up. How could you fall in love with somebody like that?”

“Ryan, stop,” Abby said, tugging at his arm. “Let’s just go.”

Ryan and Abby stormed out of the office.

“Stop!” Melissa shouted. “You’re not allowed to leave the building without permission.”

Ryan heard Melissa telling a guard to go after them.

“Run,” Ryan said.

They ran to the main door.

“How do we open it?” Abby asked.

“Maybe this will do it.” Ryan pointed to a big red button.

“It says it’s for emergencies only,” Abby said.

“Perfect.” Ryan rammed it with the palm of his hand.

The door slid open.

They ran out.

“There’s a taxi.” Ryan ran to the side of the road and waved to the cabbie.

Abby caught up with him. “Do you have any money?”

“No.”

“Then how are we going to—”

“I’ll handle it.”

Other than the color, the taxi looked like Officer Joe’s cart.

“Where to?”

"1514 Maple Avenue," Ryan said, looking back to see if the school guard had come out of the building yet.
"1514? No. There's no such address."

"Yes, there is," Abby said. "That's where we live."

The guard ran out of the school waving his hands and yelling.

"We need to get going now," Ryan said. "Just drop us off somewhere close to that address."

The driver pulled away just before the guard reached them.

Ryan was blabbing to Abby in a loud voice about how much he hated school to drown out the sound of the guard yelling for the driver to stop.

* * * * *

The cab pulled up in front of Maxi Mall and stopped.

"This is where we were this morning," Abby said.

"Why did you bring us here?" Ryan asked.

"You told me to take you close to 1514 Maple Avenue."

"That's right," Ryan said.

"Well, this mall takes up the entire 1500 block."

"Then where's our house?" Abby began to cry.

"I don't know, Abby," Ryan said.

"And where's Mom?"

The driver turned around. "Hey, I don't want to hear about your problems. Just pay up and get out of my cab!"

"We don't have any money," Ryan said, as they got out.

"Figures." The cabbie shook his head and drove away.

"Quit crying," Ryan said. "Everything's gonna be fine. I'm sure Mom will be home soon, and then she'll bring us back."

"But maybe she can't do it unless we're in that same spot we were in when we came here."

"Okay, that kinda makes sense," Ryan said. "Let's go back to it."

They ran inside the mall.

"Look out," Ryan said. "There's a mall cop."

They hid behind a column until he drove by.

Abby said, "Look at that woman over there in the store. She looks like Meg."

"Your best friend, Meg?"

"Yeah. Could it be her, all grown up—like Melissa?"

"Maybe."

"I'm gonna find out."

"But we need to get back to our spot."

"We will. But first I've got to do this." Abby bolted toward the clothing store.

"Hang on. I'm coming with you," Ryan said.

Abby walked up behind the woman, who was straightening T-shirts on a display shelf. "Meg?"

The woman turned around. "May I help you?"

"Meg, it's me—Abby."

"I'm sorry, Miss, but I don't believe I know you."

"Sure, you do, Meg."

"And why are you calling me Meg? I haven't gone by that since high school."

"Exactly. You and I were best friends in school. I'm Abby Edison."

"You're Abby's daughter? I didn't know Abby had a daughter. Of course, I haven't seen her in years."

"How could that be? We were bff's—you know, best friends forever. What happened?"

"Why do you keep saying that we were friends?"

"I mean you and my mother were such good friends. That's what I meant."

"Well, after I dropped out of college my freshman year, we sort of lost touch."

"Why did you drop out of college?" Abby asked. "You were gonna be a doctor."

"College was a lot tougher than high school."

"But you were so smart."

Meg stared at her.

"My mom said you were."

"Well, I do regret it now. I should have taken my studies more seriously. Too much partying. But I have to say that I was truly shocked when I found out your mom had dropped out."

"I dropped—I mean, my mom dropped out of college?"

"The next year," Meg said. "She never told you?"

"It seems like there's a lot I don't know about my mother."

Ryan went over to Abby. "The mall cop's coming this way."

"Ryan?" Meg looked stunned. "No, you're Ryan's son. This is very weird."

"I'm sorry, Meg," Ryan said, "but we've got to go." He grabbed Abby's hand.

"Well, tell your mom to give me a call sometime."

They hid at the front of the store.

The mall cop walked into the store and over to Meg, and appeared to be flirting with her.

Ryan and Abby ran out the door.

"Aren't we just attracting attention by running?" Abby asked.

"Probably."

They slowed to a walk.

A voice from behind them said, "You kids stop right there!"

Ryan turned around and saw the mall cop getting in his cart.

"Go!" Ryan said.

They ran to the food court at the center of the mall.

"I think it's that way." Ryan pointed to the right.

The cop turned left, but then apparently realized they had gone the other way and turned around. Now he was gaining on them. "There's no use in running. You can't get away from me. Stop!"

They saw the statue, ran to it, and sat down on the bench.

"Okay, Mom, we're ready," Ryan said. "Take us now."

Nothing happened.

"Mom, please!" Abby screamed.

* * * * *

Ryan blacked out for a moment, and when he opened his eyes he was in the basement of his house—in

his mom's lab. He glanced to his side. Abby was there too, sitting in the other GEC.

"Oh, Mom," Abby said, pulling off her helmet and running to her mother's arms.

Ryan took off his helmet and got up from his chair. "Mom, that Program X is—"

"Amazing?" Tara said, smiling.

"Did you just get home?" Abby asked.

"No, I've been watching for a while."

"But, Mom," Ryan said, "we were scared half to death in that freaky future world you built."

"You were never in any danger," Tara said. "You were sitting right here."

"Could you see what was happening to us?" Abby asked.

"I couldn't see anything," Tara said. "I want you to tell me all about it."

"Meg was there," Abby said. "She was real old—almost as old as you."

"Gee, thanks," Tara said.

"She was working in a mall. I talked to her. She told me she had dropped out of college. But she's planning on being a doctor, Mom. It was awful."

"And we ran into Melissa," Ryan said.

"That new girl you like," Tara said. "Have you still not told her you like her?"

"He's never even talked to her," Abby said.

"She was married to Kevin Pilcher—that stupid bully from the bus. How could she marry him?"

"Yeah," Abby said, "and Meg told me that I dropped out of college too."

"Excellent," Tara said, smiling.

"No," Abby said, "it was a nightmare."

"Why are you smiling, Mom?" Ryan asked.

"Because it sounds like my program worked exactly as it was suppose to," Tara said. "The things that frightened you in my program are the things that you fear the most about your future. Abby, I keep warning you that if you don't start taking your studies seriously it could jeopardize your dreams of being a doctor. And Ryan, you need to stand up to that bully, and if you really like that girl, you need to let her know—or you might regret it someday."

"But how did the program know about that stuff?" Abby asked.

"You hard-coded it in that way just for us, didn't you?" Ryan asked.

"No—although I could have, since I know you two so well. But I wanted the program to be able to sense your fears and turn them into dramatic scenarios that would teach you the lessons you need to learn."

"So that it could be used to help other kids too," Ryan said.

"Right," Tara said. "And even adults."

"I guess it worked then," Abby said, "cause all I want to do right now is go study—as soon as I call Meg."

"No," Tara said. "You can't tell anybody about my experiments. You know that."

"Oh, right," Abby said. "I won't. Don't worry, Mom. I'm just glad to be home—and I'm glad I'm not old." Tara smirked at her.

"Well, I know what I'm gonna do," Ryan said, heading for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Tara asked.

"I won't tell anybody, Mom, I promise." Ryan went out the door.

* * * * *

Ryan rode his bicycle in the dark to Melissa Myer's house. From a distance, he saw a couple sitting out front in a double seated swing. The porch light was off, but even in the faint light beaming from a window, he recognized Melissa. The guy's back was to him. Surely it wasn't Kevin Pilcher. Had it already begun? Was he too late?

He dropped his bicycle in the front yard and ran toward the porch. "Stop! You can't have her, you stinking —."

The guy turned around. It wasn't Kevin.

And Melissa...wasn't Melissa.

The man said, "Can I help you, son?"

"I'm sorry, Sir," Ryan said. "I thought you were somebody else."

"Somebody who stinks?"

The woman laughed.

"No—I mean, that's not what I meant," Ryan said, feeling like a complete idiot.

"Are you looking for Melissa?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Ryan said.

"I'm her mom and this is her dad."

"Oh," Ryan said. "Good to meet you."

"Melissa? You've got company," her mother yelled.

"Thanks," Ryan suddenly realized that he had no idea what he was going to say to Melissa. He'd never spoken to her. This needed to be perfect. Perfect. Why hadn't he taken the time to write out a little speech? He only had one shot and this was it, and he was about to blow it. This was why he had never spoken to her—because he'd never come up with the perfect words. She was so beautiful and wonderful—she deserved perfect words. But he didn't have any the perfect words for her. He didn't have any words. What the heck was he doing here?

Melissa opened the door. "Hi, Ryan."

He gulped. "You know my name?" *Those were his first words to her? Those weren't perfect words—they were stupid words, you idiot!*

"Of course." She smiled.

Her dad said, "Invite him in for a Coke, so your mom and I can get some privacy out here."

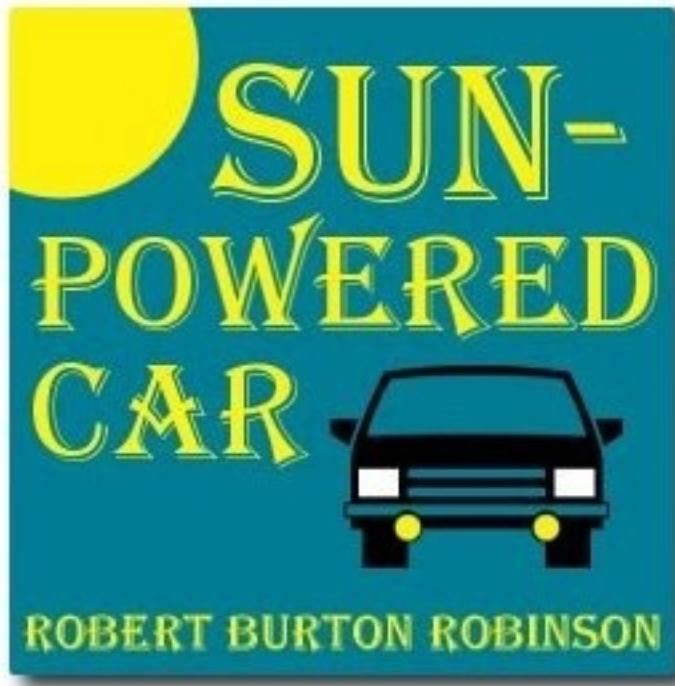
"Oh, Phil." Melissa's mom laughed.

"Come on in," Melissa said.

Ryan walked through the doorway of his new future. *Thanks, Mom—you're amazing.*

THE END

SUN-POWERED CAR



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GENRE: Humor. LENGTH: 1,364 words. SYNOPSIS: A washed-up TV reporter sees a chance for a big story when he discovers an amazing invention while passing through a small town.

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It was just another lousy day in the life of a has-been TV news reporter.

Malcolm was past his prime. And at age 57, he'd long ago given up on his dream of sitting in the anchor chair. But the assignments he'd been getting recently were just downright degrading.

It was a three-hour drive back to the city. He was starving. Didn't they at least have a McDonald's in this crummy little town? He decided to stop at the next restaurant he saw—no matter what it looked like.

Helen's Hamburgers: the best burgers in town, the sign read. Malcolm suspected that Helen's might be the *only* burger joint in town. The fact there were no cars parked in front made him hesitate. He checked his watch. It was only 11:00 AM—too early for most lunchers.

He parked his car and got out. Just as he was about to go inside, he heard something coming up the street. It was too noisy to be a bicycle, yet too quiet to be a car. He turned around.

The brakes squeaked on the 1957 Chevy Bel Air 4-door hardtop as it pulled in behind his car. It was in decent shape for a 50-year-old car. But an odd-looking luggage rack had been bolted to the top. Malcolm hated to see a great classic car defiled like that.

But why was the engine so quiet? Then he realized that the flat thing on top of the car was not a luggage rack—it was a solar panel.

A middle-aged man wearing overalls got out of the driver's seat. Two husky twenty-something guys in jeans, T-shirts and boots got out of the back seat.

Malcolm held the door for them. The older man thanked him. The three men took a seat at a round table near the front window. Malcolm picked a spot several tables away.

A woman in her mid-forties wearing a flowery 1950's style day dress walked to the men's table. "Howdy, Ned. How are you boys doing today?"

"We're fine, Helen."

"Well, what'll you have?"

One of the younger men looked like he was about to speak when Ned said, "Just give us the usual."

"Okee-dokee." She walked around behind the counter and yelled back to the kitchen as though she were calling hogs, "Three triple cheeseburgers with onion rings, one vanilla shake and two chocolate shakes."

"Got it," shouted a male voice.

The bell on the door jingled as a middle-aged man in a black and gray beard entered the restaurant. His jeans had obviously never been near a washing machine. And his cowboy hat was so crumpled that Malcolm guessed the man slept in it every night. "What that heck did you do to your car, Ned?"

Ned grinned. "I finally got it right, Jake. It's my crowning achievement."

The men discussed Ned's car for a few more seconds. Then they talked about Jake's chickens for a while.

"What can I get you today, Sir?"

Malcolm had not noticed Helen approaching his table. And he hadn't even looked at the menu that was printed right on the table.

"Uh...what do you recommend?"

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"No, Ma'am."

"But you do look kinda familiar for some reason," said Helen.

Malcolm tried not to smile. "You ever watch Channel 12 News?"

"Yes. Sometimes. It's not my favorite, but..."

"I'm their senior reporter. Been there for over 25 years."

"You're the anchor?"

"No, I'm not an anchor. Should have been, but never quite made it."

"Oh—are you the guy who reported the big high-rise fire last week?"

"No." He sighed. "I was on a farm that day. The people said they had a high-jumping pig. They claimed it was destined to break the Guinness World Record of 27.5 inches. That stinky animal couldn't even clear a cinder block."

"I've never heard of a jumping pig."

"I wish I hadn't. Just give me a hamburger, fries and a coke."

"Coming right up." Helen turned to walk away.

"Oh, one other thing, if you don't mind," said Malcolm.

Helen turned back around, smiling. "Onion rings?"

"Uh, no thanks. I just wanted to ask you about that man over there—Ned."

"Yes? What about him?"

"I heard him telling that man with a beard that his car was sun-powered."

"Yeah. Isn't that something? He finally got it working."

"He did it himself?"

"Yep. He loves to invent stuff."

"Is that what he does for a living?"

"No. He's a farmer. But he used to work for an aircraft company. Until they shut down. Then he took over his daddy's farm."

"Interesting. Thanks."

Helen walked away.

Malcolm's mouth began to water—but not for the burger and fries. What a story, he thought: Farmer outsmarts young high-tech whipper-snappers, building the first practical solar-powered automobile—in the form of a '57 Chevy!

A young waitress delivered the food to Ned's table, and the three men began to gobble it down. By the

time Malcolm had reached them, they were half finished. "I apologize for interrupting your lunch, but I just had to ask about your car."

Ned smiled as he continued to chew. "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

"Yes. And I overheard you say that the car is sun-powered."

"That's right," said Ned.

The two young men both nodded in agreement as they stuffed their faces.

"So, does it use any batteries?"

"Sure—for nighttime driving."

"Of course. Because there's no sunlight."

"Yeah. I can't be driving around in the dark. Might hit a cow. Besides, it's illegal."

"You mean you only have batteries so you can run your headlights?"

"And taillights. One battery. That's all."

"You're kidding me," said Malcolm.

"Nope. Just the one six-volter."

"Wow. That's amazing." Malcolm suddenly realized that he wasn't writing anything down. But how could he possibly forget any of this? "Mind if I take a closer look?"

"No problem." Ned sucked down the rest of his shake, took a few bills out of his wallet and dropped them on the table. "Come on." He stood up and proudly led Malcolm out to his masterpiece.

"Check this out," said Ned, popping the hood.

Malcolm could not keep his jaw from dropping. There was nothing under the hood except a six-volt battery, strapped down with a bungee cord.

Ned closed the hood and walked around to the side of the car. "Back here is where the action is." He opened the back seat door.

Malcolm was confused. "What is this?"

"This is where the power is applied."

Malcolm took a closer look. The floor board where the passengers' feet normally rest had been cut out to make room for what appeared to be bicycle gears, chains and pedals.

"I thought you said this car was completely solar powered?"

"Solar powered? Heck, no. I said it was son-powered. That's what I call it—my son-powered car."

The two young men walked out of Helen's and took their places in the back seat, positioning their cowboy boots on the pedals.

"Well, then what's this?" Malcolm pointed to the solar panel on top of the car.

"That's a solar panel."

"Then why don't you use it?"

"I tried. But it only gives me enough power to run the headlights. And I don't need the headlights in the daytime." Ned got into the driver's seat and shut the door. "Let's go, boys."

His two sons began to pedal as Ned steered the car onto the road.

"Nice talking with you," shouted Ned as they drove away.

Malcolm stood there shaking his head. He should have known better than to think he would be so lucky. He went back into Helen's and started eating his lukewarm ham-burger and fries.

Then it hit him. Ned's car was not the technical break-through story. It wasn't the solution to skyrocketing oil prices. But it was a quirky, human interest story. And he was going to get it!

He threw some cash on the table, rushed out of the restaurant, jumped in his car, and sped off. Ned could not be more than a few blocks away.

It was not going to be a lousy day after all.

THE END